

Farm Family Matters

How to Handle a Bum Brother



Lance Woodbury DTN Farm Business Adviser
Bio

Tue Mar 16, 2010 11:23 AM CDT

Remember the tune, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother"? While the Hollies' classic song is a melodic calling to the practice of brotherly love, the reality of brothers working together on the farm can be less than peaceful. Who hasn't heard a story of -- or even witnessed -- angry tirades, silent treatments, shouting matches or even occasional fisticuffs among farm siblings in your local community?

A key source of irritation on sibling teams is the view that one brother is doing more work than another brother. Or, more directly, that the other brother isn't "pulling his weight." The comparisons might be in the number of hours worked, the time spent on "non-work" activities like family or recreation, or perceived differences in contribution to the bottom line. Whatever the yardstick, here are a few considerations when dealing with a bum brother.

MAKE YOUR PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS KNOWN

One of the biggest sources of conflict in an organization or in relationships is differing expectations of behavior. You expect your brother to do something: to vaccinate the cattle in a certain amount of time, or start the planting by a particular date, or deal with employees in a certain way. He doesn't meet your expectations, and you end up disappointed.

In a family business setting, you still have differences in expectations, but it seems more difficult to talk about them because the consequences of not meeting expectations can have a negative impact not just on the business, but especially on the family. If you have it out with your brother, and he leaves, it will probably make family gatherings and relationships even more awkward and uncomfortable.

So families generally avoid discussions about expectations, and as a consequence, those "missed" expectations go undiscussed and build up like steam in a teapot -- eventually they blow! To contrast, in a non-family business, a performance evaluation would offer a good opportunity to discuss such situations. But how many brothers do you know who conduct formal performance evaluations of one another?

Figure out a way to let your brother know what you expect of him, preferably before you jump him for not doing his share. As an exercise, perhaps you should write out your expectations of each other, or of all family members who work on the farm, then share the written versions with each other to see if you are on the same page. Or, get together over coffee and talk about your "top three" expectations of each other going forward (so you don't get hung up in the past). You might even start with a behavioral profile instrument to crystallize how you see things differently. Myers-Briggs is perhaps the best known personality test, but DiSC, True Colors and Strengths Finder from Gallup also have merits.

KEEP YOUR CRITICISMS PRIVATE

Because of the lack of expectations-oriented discussion and the general high degree of frustration, brothers often go home to their spouses and complain. It's natural to "vent" about your family to those with whom you are close. However, be careful of the way in which you may be shaping your spouse's perspective. If all they ever hear is your complaint, they may develop an especially negative view, which makes it very difficult for them to interact with your brother, or with your brother's spouse, or even with your brother's kids. In particular, many farm wives feel like they are "caught in the middle" in



While fisticuffs do happen, farming families would be more productive to deal with any conflicts before it gets to that point. (Photo courtesy Wayne Short)

Stay a step ahead with market and weather alerts

...sent directly to your mobile device.



[Click here for a free trial](#)

Related News Stories

[Ag Interest Rate Snapshot](#)

[Minding Ag's Business](#)

[Interest Rate's Gold Rush](#)

[Farmers Flock to Fixed-Rate Financing](#)

[Minding Ag's Business](#)

[Autopsy on Wall Street's "Big Short"](#)

[Minding Ag's Business](#)

[More Quick Fixes for Disaster Program](#)

[MBAg by Adam Erwin](#)

[It's Test Plot Time](#)

Ag News

[DTN's Quick Takes](#)

[Washington Insider -- Thursday](#)

[Pushback on Mexican Truck Restrictions](#)

[Market Impact Weather](#)

[Some Key Midwest Areas Miss Storms](#)

[Farm Bill Budget Hole Looms](#)

[Dozens of Programs Need Funding to Carry Forward in 2012](#)

[Groups Push for Child Nutrition Bill](#)

[House Members, Anti-Hunger Advocates Disagree on How to Pay for Bill](#)

[Sanow's Market Sense](#)

[A Walk Down Memory Lane](#)

[Woodbury: Farm Family Business](#)

[Don't Wait for Congress to Resolve Estate Tax Deadlock](#)

[Harvest Delays Likely for Corn](#)

[Tight Corn Crop Helps Support Price Through Harvest](#)

[more...](#)

that they need to support their husbands by empathizing with them, but are then expected to interact positively with the family members about whom you spent a majority of time complaining.

The same kind of tension can exist with the employees. If employees see farm siblings fighting, it can lead to a political dance (and the organizational gossip that goes with it) as they try to anticipate on whose side they should land. And your more opportunistic employees even look for ways to play siblings off one another as it generates attention for the employee as a confidant.

KNOW YOUR OPTIONS

My concluding suggestion is for you to spend some time figuring out where you stand. Write down the likely scenarios and pros and cons of various outcomes. If you share your expectations, and your brother isn't interested in operating anywhere close to how you think you should operate, what will you do? Perhaps you can live with the different levels of contribution and the associated frustration, as many do. Maybe you should push for a re-evaluation of job responsibilities and compensation. Or, is it worth pushing your brother to leave, possibly leaving yourself, or splitting the farm? Thinking hard about your position and the consequences of your options may not lead directly to the Hollies' notion of brotherly love, but it may lead to some internal peace with the future of the family business.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Lance Woodbury works as a consultant to family owned and closely held businesses in Garden City, Kan., with a special emphasis on business planning, mediation and conflict resolution. He also maintains an interest in his family's western Kansas ranch. Send e-mail suggestions for this column to lance@lancewoodbury.com.

(AGISK)

© Copyright 2010 DTN/The Progressive Farmer, A Telvent Brand. All rights reserved.

U.S. & World News

[New Jobless Rate Lowest in 2 Months](#)

[Afghans Promised Election Security](#)

[Mortgage Rates, Foreclosures Rise](#)

[Roadside Bomb Kills 9 in Turkey](#)

[Controlled Detonation Kills US Airman](#)

[EU Summit Taken Over by Gypsy Issue](#)

[Israeli Settlements Key to Peace](#)

[Tropical Storm Karl Heads to Gulf](#)

[more...](#)