



Talk *ain't* cheap

... but lack of communication may hamper a family farm's chance for success. ■ By Bill Spiegel

Let's talk." Two words most people dread hearing.

Farm families are no exception. But effective communication between family members is imperative if the family farm will survive into the next generation. While you may not be thinking of it now, determining who will succeed you is more important than ever. The average age of Kansas farmers is 54.4 years. That average keeps rising as fewer young farmers enter the profession.

It's not too early to plan for the future. In the mid-90s, Roger and Sue Pine of Lawrence had two grown children, both of whom were interested in farming. Always a solid farming operation, the 4,000-acre Pine Family Farms continues to progress with the entire family involved.

Bringing the two younger Pines into

the operation changed everything. Talking about dreams and goals helped position the farm for success.

"I made up my mind a long time ago that I didn't want to pressure either of the children to come back to the farm," says Roger Pine, Shawn and Brian's father. "That was their choice. I didn't think Shawn would come back unless she married someone interested in farming."

Shawn's desire to return wasn't taken seriously by her family at first. "Rightfully so," Shawn explains.

As a sales representative for a pharmaceutical company, Shawn had a number of benefits: insurance, a company car and steady hours. But she wasn't happy. Her sales career at an impasse, Shawn took a year to think about giving up her career and moving back to Lawrence. In 1992, she began working on the farm.

A few years later, Brian's wife, Kathy, noticed he seemed a lot happier on the farm than in the office. In 1995, he quit working for Farm Credit Services and began working for his parents.

With the two kids involved, frustration between parents and children was inevitable. The Pines wisely sought counsel from people outside the operation to discover what each person in the operation wanted to gain. The goal was to develop a stronger family business based on trust and communication. If the family business ever interfered with their ability to get along outside of the business setting, the Pines decided they would not continue working together as a family.

"We had good relationships with each other," Sue says, "and we weren't willing to let the family business get in the way."

The Pines found that counseling was expensive. Conflict resolution costs from \$100 to \$1,500 per day, depending on the mediator. Your local Extension agent, attorney, accountant or church may provide a list of qualified mediators.

Christian counselor Mack Harn-den, formerly of Lawrence, helped the Pines immediately. The importance of family and interpersonal relationships — never a problem in the family to begin with — was reiterated. Still, the family craved more agriculture-related guidance. Lance Woodbury, mediator/facilitator with Kennedy and Coe, was hired to help resolve conflicts that occur when parents begin to work with their adult children.

"Part of the problem," says Brian, "is that Shawn and I went to college. We thought we knew what was going on and really, we didn't. There were reasons why Dad was stubborn, doing things his way. They made sense."

Shawn adds: "We came back to the farm and were still Mom and Dad's kids. We'd been working as adults and they didn't see us in our professional careers. We were kids working for our parents. It was an adjustment for all of us."

Woodbury met individually with all six family members — Brian and Shawn's spouses included — and learned

their expectations. He noted each family member's goals and brought them into the open for discussion. Most farm families don't like airing their feelings. What comes out of these discussions, Woodbury says, is eye opening.

"Generally, families are on the same page. They just don't talk about their goals and ideas (without help)," he explains. "Seldom do I find that the family disagrees and there is no solution."

Of the one-on-one time spent with Woodbury, Shawn says: "It was therapeutic to say things as bluntly as I wanted. When we meet as a family, he knows

Roger, Sue and Brian Pine and Shawn Pine Bay used a mediator to help communicate as a family and as farming business partners. Communication, they stress, is key to the farm's success.



our issues and draws them out. It always amazes me how each of us are concerned about the same issues."

By 1998, the Pines had developed a four-way partnership. Each member of the immediate family owns 25%. Each member also has specific tasks — Roger is CEO and oversees the entire farm and production of the traditional crops. Brian is in charge of the family's turfgrass production operation. Shawn markets the sod and traditional grains for the family and their 35 landlords. Sue is the financial officer, accountant and banker.

Now the four principal owners meet each morning for the day's business, then once a week for planning purposes. They and their spouses meet quarterly. Every two to three years, they meet for a strategic planning meeting.

"Good communication is the most important element to a successful family business. For us, investing in someone who helps us facilitate our communication is the best and most important money we spend," Shawn says.

Admittedly, what works for the Pines doesn't work for all families. In most cases, one or two siblings may farm while others work off the farm. One son may be farming and there's not enough land for another. Communication, Woodbury insists, is the one thing families can do to hash out differences.

"Too many families wait until no one is speaking and expect an outsider to solve all the problems. The ones who are successful have outside help," he says.

After analyzing the farm's financial status and the goals of the family members, some families have opted to leave farming altogether. It's better to decide that now than in a few years, he adds.

Still, family is family. In most situations, communication resolves the problems. "The farm is necessary for all of us," explains Sue Pine. "There's a lot of love and respect here, a lot of emotions."

"It's easy to say that Lance's service is not necessary," she adds. "But if you are not making good decisions, neither the farm nor the family is the winner. You've got to make good decisions to survive." ♦

Tips for successful communication

Communication may be simple among friends, but between family members, it sometimes can be a challenge. Here are some tips to ensure positive communication when talking to family members about the family farm.

■ Choose to communicate. "The biggest roadblock is that people don't admit communication is something that needs to be done," says Lance Woodbury, mediator/facilitator with Kennedy and Coe. "The family has to decide to intentionally communicate."

■ Meet at a neutral location. Gathering at Mom and Dad's place naturally intimidates family members, Woodbury says. "We want to have a setting where the power is balanced among family members and a neutral location helps accomplish that."

■ Challenge assumptions. Too often, parents and kids assume they know what the other wants. "The paradox, especially in succession planning, is that Mom and Dad want to know what the kids want to do, while the kids don't want to appear greedy or pushy," Woodbury says. "Talking about your role and goals is important." What's your role in the future and goals for the business.

■ Don't leave anyone out. "If you want the family to survive, you must include all the family members, spouses included," says Linda Hessman, owner of Conflict Resolution Program, Dodge City. "We get so immersed in the land, we sometimes lose sight of the family." ♦