

## Guiding Principles: Embrace Change

By [Tanner Ehmke](#)

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz famously challenged farmers in the 1970s with his blunt quote, “Adapt or die.” That philosophy of being willing to break from the past and embrace change is a core value for Mount Olive, N.C., farmer Reggie Strickland of Strickland Farming. (Read more on Strickland’s family business philosophies in the [Ag Progress Dispatch’s April issue](#).) “We have a willingness to change,” Strickland notes, pointing out that the family farm diversified out of cotton and into corn, wheat and soybeans amidst major market changes despite having had a history of growing cotton on the 3,700-acre farm. Strickland Farming today also grows tobacco, sweet potatoes, pickles and string beans and grows hogs under contract.

Finding opportunity in a changing environment is the kind of philosophy that businesses need to thrive in times of change, stress Martin Reeves and Mike Deimler, partners in Boston Consulting Group, in their Harvard Business Review article, [“Adaptability: The New Competitive Advantage.”](#) Instead of companies being really good at doing a particular thing, Reeves and Deimler advise businesses to excel at learning how to do new things. Those that thrive in a changing world, they argue, excel in four areas key to adaptation:

1. They are quick to read and act on signals of change.
2. They experiment rapidly, frequently and economically not only with products and services, but also with business models, processes and strategies.
3. They build up skills in managing complex multi-stakeholder systems in an increasingly interconnected world.
4. They unlock their greatest resource—the people who work for them.

The adaptive approach is no universal panacea, Reeves and Deimler warn. If your industry is stable and relatively predictable, you may be better off sticking to the traditional sources of advantage. But if your competitive reality is uncertain, you need a dynamic and sustainable way to stay ahead.

Perhaps the biggest adaptive challenges are the personal ones a leader in transition must face, notes Michael Watkins in his Harvard Business Review article, [“Picking the Right Transition Strategy.”](#) Watkins warns that leaders in transition often rely on the skills and strategies that worked for them in the past, which is a mistake.

“Executives in transition must gain a deep understanding of the situation at hand and adapt to that reality,” Watkins says. “Otherwise, to paraphrase Mark Twain, people with hammers will treat everything like a nail, even when the job at hand may be better accomplished with a drill or a saw.”

## Got Meetings?

By [Davon Cook](#)

A lot of our work with clients boils down to one topic: effective communication. This isn’t news to most of you, but it I consistently hear that message. You have so many things to manage every day, but you repeatedly mention communication as a constant challenge and, when it happens well, as an occasion for celebrating improvement.

When our peer groups convene, we often start with operation updates and current challenges. After discussing the weather and crop issues of a particular season, communication – or lack thereof – is often the next topic. Particularly during a trying season with delays and stops and starts, members reflect how hard it is to keep the team organized, or they remember difficult family interactions under pressure. In my work with family businesses, I have found two keys to effective communication are the habit of regular meetings, and the successful management of those meetings.

**Commit to Meeting:** When I work with a business, our action plan often includes regular meetings among owners, managers or employee teams. Later, when we review progress, those meetings are at the top of the list of “wins.” They recognize the value of building a forum for and habit of communication.

It may sound elementary, but this habit of meeting has a big impact on the organization. Do you have a regular forum for encouraging communication? The goal is not only to coordinate tasks, but also to discuss decisions to be made together or inform others of decisions made in each area of responsibility. Don’t you *want* your partners’ or team members’ insight and critical thinking to reach the best decision possible? To build this habit, a consistent day



and time works best, with the commitment that you'll connect via phone when face-to-face meetings are not possible.

**Manage the Process:** Successfully managing the meeting is just as important as its regularity. Keep meetings productive with an agenda and a designated leader to move the discussion along. It may be as simple as updates on different areas of responsibility, but following a consistent outline provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to share information. Consider rotating leaders as an opportunity to develop facilitation skills.

If you feel you already have enough meetings, review their purpose and effectiveness and make the necessary adjustments. Most importantly, renew your commitment to effective communication. Your business and family will be better!

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## Will They Hold It Together? Find Out Now

By [Wayne Johnson](#)

Everyone knows a family – or several – who were not able to hold the family business or assets together. Are you concerned about your farm and family staying intact for future generations? Consider a Pre-Inheritance Experience to increase the odds of maintaining harmony among the family and continuing the legacy of the family business long after you are gone.

A Pre-Inheritance Experience provides an opportunity for the family's next generation to learn to work together, while their parents observe from the sidelines. The idea is that the next generation begins to build working relationships and develop into the roles that will be needed when the senior generation is no longer with them. This experience may consist of something as simple as jointly planning the next family event, developing a charitable giving program, or even establishing a small "family bank" for the benefit of family members.

These experiences offer the next generation the opportunity to establish better communication and build trust, gain skills related to project management and planning, and to develop an orderly and intentional way to eventually transfer leadership. The senior generation benefits by seeing how their heirs are likely to act once they are gone, by identifying areas of concern to be addressed, and by providing more clear and comprehensive guidance to family members.

The keys to successfully implementing Pre-Inheritance Experiences are for the senior generation to commit to doing the exercise annually, to allow the next generation to learn from their mistakes and try again, and to stay out of the next generation's work. The primary focus of the senior generation must be the working relationships of the next generation and on the lessons learned during the project.

Pre-Inheritance Experiences are best used as ongoing elements of an intentional plan to maintain the family's values and wealth, and can offer significant insight as to what the future holds.

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## Faith and Family Business: A Little-Recognized Benefit of Wisdom

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

For the Book of Proverbs, the benefits of wisdom are clear and numerous. The wise person learns practical skills, such as discernment and good judgment; he or she knows how to act with "righteousness, justice and equity" (1:3). Indeed, such a person knows "every good path" (2:8). Who wouldn't sign up?

But overlooked in all of these is a cryptic verse that opens up an entirely new realm to wisdom's scope. "**The purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them out**" (20:5). Though the meaning of the first words isn't completely clear, the dominant reading is that "purposes of the human mind" are the often confused and tangled reflections which constitute human uncertainty regarding the complexities of life. These purposes are like "deep water"—unfathomable, inaccessible, unclear and potentially dangerous. In other words, the first half of the verse describes what we might call the tangled, confused and often murky information "out there" that is often connected with conflicting, and often evil, impulses of the human heart.

Confronted with this kind of reality, the "intelligent person" or "person of understanding" will "draw them out." The metaphor of "drawing" is often used in Scripture as a way of describing the process of salvation. "God drew me up from the desolate pit" (Ps. 40:2); "O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol" (Ps. 30:3).

The point, in a nutshell, is that the wise person can develop the very rare ability to perceive the tangled complexity of life, and "draw it up" to the surface, where it is subject to the light of wisdom, and the examination by others. The person of wisdom can clarify deep and complex issues—and that is a benefit worth pursuing in your family and business every day.

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