

Woodbury: Farm Family Business

How to Talk to Your Kids



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As a parent of three young children, I often wonder about the best way to communicate with my kids. How best to reason with them? How best to get their attention? How best to get them to listen to me? Finding effective communication methods with a 6- and 3-year-old can at times be more difficult than any business-related challenge I've seen or faced!

In my work with families, I can tell you this quest for improved communication does not go away. Parents continue to struggle with how best to interact with their kids, and as kids mature, they become more attuned to the challenges of communicating with their parents. Throw an actively managed business in the mix, and the communication needs -- and challenges -- increase dramatically. Here are a few suggestions for eliminating some communication barriers.

CREATE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION

In a family business, there are plenty of informal opportunities to communicate. Day-to-day management often requires a fair amount of checking in with one another. Seeing one another in the shop, or having lunch in town, offers a chance to get on the same page with your current business thoughts. Those chances to touch base are important to the running of the business.

But when talking about estate or succession plans, significant management changes or family conflict, having such conversations while driving around the pasture, or while you are on the way to town for parts, may allow for an introduction of a topic, but it does not allow for the focused interaction that needs to occur around such important issues. Set a time, and possibly a neutral location, to cover the more significant family business issues. And turn your cell phone off. The future of the business is at stake and it deserves your full attention.

STOP TALKING

Too often we think of communication primarily as talking to someone else. The goal is to get a particular message across. But in a family business, listening is the skill most often missing. The long history of interaction, the close relationships, and the patterns of informality all contribute to a general taking for granted of the other person's position.

Ask people what they think and then listen. Try to repeat what you are hearing. Clarify your understanding through questions. The reality is that everyone wants to be heard, and giving your family members that opportunity may be the biggest contribution you can make to the smooth functioning of the family and business.

BE MINDFUL OF CARROTS

One of the biggest obstacles to good, honest family business communication can sometimes be the parents reminding the offspring of what will "someday be theirs." While there should be definite ground rules for a discussion (such as demonstrating respect for participants), linking the eventual disposition of agriculture's capital-intensive assets to what gets said in a meeting creates a culture of hesitancy that only hurts the business. Encourage family members to be respectful, but to be honest with their thoughts and opinions.

RECOGNIZE IT'S A PROCESS

Over the years, I've met some families who want to get together for a day or a



Don't confuse day-to-day logistics with communication. Retreats in neutral locations work best for serious discussions. (DTN/The Progressive Farmer file photo)

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...over the years, the business families that have succeeded in doing so -- weekend and improve their communication. They think that having an event -- a meeting or retreat -- will solve some of the problems they are facing. I often tell families that it took years to develop their current communication patterns, and changing those patterns -- getting better at communication -- will not happen in a weekend. In fact, some surveys show the average farm family spends nearly a decade working through estate and ownership transition issues. That gives time for families to sort out some hard decisions on how to treat heirs fairly and what kind of legacy to leave, but it does require patience.

Communication on strategic issues for the family business should be thought of as an ongoing process, one that will have some positive elements and some "two-steps-back" moments. But the successful family businesses keep working at it. Indeed, it's a different kind of work, and it's not easy, but the dividends can last a lifetime.

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. E-mail comments or suggestions for this column to lance@lancewoodbury.com.

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