

Woodbury: Farm Family Business

Reducing the Stress Level in Your Business



Lance Woodbury DTN Farm Business Adviser
Bio

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While some reality television shows have a positive, uplifting message, most shows are based on conflict, tension and stress. TV producers have figured out that the viewing public enjoys the drama around other people's situations and relationships. We just love to see the Donald fire someone, to see the Housewives gossip or Mobwives fight, or to watch the Kardashian sisters' latest problems.

If someone wanted to film a reality show in agriculture, this might be the summer to do it: drought, crop destruction, market volatility, labor shortages, livestock liquidation, water depletion, insurance audits, land prices, land competition, loan renewals, uncertain rents, upcoming estate and capital gains tax changes, farm bill ambiguity, equipment prices, succession plans, family conflict. If something in this list doesn't cause stress in your life, you should apply for a tougher job!

A family business, because people are close, can provide a supportive environment in stressful times. But if family members are not on the same page or working well together, the current issues facing agriculture can exacerbate poor relationships and communication. If you are dealing with much stress in your operation, here a few suggestions to alleviate the anxiety.

TALK

When people are stressed out, they often bottle up their frustrations. They might feel helpless, unable to affect factors outside of their control (this was a key contributor to personal stress during the 1980s farm crisis). People in agriculture and rural communities often feel that sharing their "dirty laundry" with an outsider is not appropriate. Or that tough people -- farmers and ranchers in particular -- don't show emotion or talk about their problems.

In many of the family businesses I know, just having someone to whom you can vent frustrations can be valuable for family members individually and for the group as a whole. An outsider can listen, offer feedback, and help you think about solutions or come to a different view of the problem. Just by talking through your situation, you often gain new insights or perspective. You can let your harshest words fly out of earshot of your partners or family members. If you bottle up the frustrations, you are more likely to take them out on a family member who may not deserve your wrath... and create a personal conflict from which it may be difficult to recover.

Some of the people who may listen to your concerns include a peer group, your minister, your accountant or other professional advisors, a close friend, a business owner not in your community or a business owner in a different industry. While you can also use your family business meetings to share your concerns, be careful to not spend the whole meeting talking about frustrations, or people may not want to meet

again!

FOCUS

Part of what causes stress in our lives is a feeling of being overwhelmed. If you go back to the list of potential stressors, it is easy to become dazed by the multitude of issues facing the business and family this season.

Some of the stress can be reduced by prioritizing and choosing a limited number of items to work on. Write down the three most important problems to solve for the week or month, and focus on moving the ball forward only on those items. Then, as you



Good communication among family members in a farm family business can help reduce stressful situations. (DTN illustration by Nick Scalise)



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make progress on each issue, write down your accomplishments. The act of reflecting on what you achieved -- even in a problem-solving mode -- can provide the momentum to keep tackling the tough issues. You will notice the list getting shorter, and the stress decreasing, if you focus on a narrow number of items at regular intervals and make steady, noticeable progress on key issues.

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COLLABORATE

While we often celebrate the independence of American agriculture, it can sometimes work against us. The simple fact is that no one is good at everything; people and thus businesses have different strengths. Stress often plays on our weaknesses, showing up in those areas where we have low confidence or a lousy track record. For example, many growers will admit that marketing is their toughest challenge, and we've just gone through a significant increase in grain prices that very few expected as of four months ago. How confident can anyone feel when the market takes such volatile swings? Others are uncomfortable with their supervisory skills, and the labor shortage in agriculture can put a lot of stress on improving relationships with key employees. Turnover of employees or the loss of a key staff member can reinforce a feeling of inadequacy in managing personnel.

Every successful family business I know can point to a time in its history when someone helped them out of a tough situation or suggested how they could change something in their operation. Someone offered assistance, or the family asked for help, and people put their heads together to improve the situation. Increasingly I am asked to facilitate meetings between clients where one family's strengths offset another family's weaknesses. The result is not just less stress for the families involved, but increased opportunity to expand in each of their respective strengths. Stress is transformed into new opportunities. Don't hesitate to reach out to like-minded successful neighbors or business owners in a neighboring community. The chances are that you will be better off by doing so.

To reduce stress, you first have to admit you have it. This year, in light of weather, economic and political uncertainty, with the impending management transitions in agriculture, and with the general complexities of working in a family business, anxiety is the rule, not the exception. Do yourself, and your family, a favor by lessening the strain in your operation.

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.

You can hear Woodbury speak at the DTN-Progressive Farmer Ag Summit's "Pass It On!" workshop Dec. 9 in Chicago. For details go to www.dtnpf.com/go/agsummit

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