



Marcia Zarley Taylor DTN Executive Editor

[Bio](#) | [Email](#)

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Bring Down the Shout in Family Conflict

Succession planning is fraught with opportunities for family conflict – between siblings, between parents and their adult children, between those on the farm and their relatives living elsewhere.

I recently asked Lance Woodbury, DTN's family business columnist and a trained mediator, about some methods to “bring down the shout” between family members.

Woodbury: Marcia, there are a few techniques that help prevent conflict in the family business. Of course, open communication and listening skills often get mentioned, but I want to offer a few others for readers to consider:

1. Discuss expectations of one another. Due to the long-term relationships and informal communication patterns of family members, lots of important things are assumed. For example, a son or daughter who returned earlier may assume that he or she will inherit or have the chance to buy a greater portion of the business. But a parent might assume that because both children are family and both are involved in the business, they each should have an equal share.

Another example lies in performance evaluations. Most non-family businesses have some sort of evaluation system, even of owners or partners or leaders in the business. But do family business members in your family business evaluate one another? The evaluative process is not only important for the feedback it provides (which is often lacking in a family enterprise), but also because it helps to clarify what people expect of one another and openly discuss whether those expectations are being met.

In a non-family business, these kind of issues would generally be on the table, but because of the sensitivity around family relationships and what is appropriate to discuss, many families don't have the conversation until plans have been developed, long-term performance judgments have been made and assumptions are built. I know it is hard, but family members have to be willing to talk about what they expect of one another. Better to find out early if performance and transitions are going as planned, then to get several years down the road and be highly frustrated.

2. Focus on the result, not the method. Especially in transitions between generations, how something gets done can become a source of conflict. The senior generation learned by trial and error and found the optimal way to accomplish a task. Surely, they think, the younger generation shouldn't repeat those mistakes!

But the younger generation may have a different way of accomplishing the task. They may encounter the same mistakes of their seniors, which will still provide good learning, or they may get it done in a totally different way. The question is not whether they did it the way you did it – the question is whether they got it done to an acceptable standard and learned from the process. In other words, you have to be willing to switch from a metric of “here's how I did it” to “here's what we got done.”

3. Err on the side of discussion and inclusion. Due to the lack of participation, knowledge, and experience of in-laws or family members off the farm, it can feel painfully slow to include those folks in conversations. And you shouldn't need to

necessarily include them in daily on-farm decision-making.

But long term discussions about ownership, entity structure, roles and finances warrant inclusion, if for no other reason than to gain some buy-in of changes in the future. One of my recommendations is to include anyone who can throw a wrench in your plans, so that you know exactly what you are up against and can work on strategies to avoid painful and costly conflict down the road. In other words, consider acts of slowing down and getting people involved not a cost, but an investment in future alignment of shareholders and family members.

I wish there was a silver bullet for conflict prevention, but talking about expectations, results and inclusion are really the keys to long-term family harmony.

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