

Leave A Legacy: Accountability Drives Succession Progress

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Making progress with estate or succession planning can often feel like one step forward, two steps back. Yet some families make tremendous progress in several months, while others remain stuck, mired in indecision, poor communication and conflict. What's the difference between those who move forward and those who fall apart?

In a word, it's accountability. It's the notion that making progress—even baby steps—is a priority. But how do people keep making those steps? Consider these three methods for accountability in your planning efforts:

Commit to your broader family. While not always the case, family relationships usually allow us the freedom and protection to share our aspirations and fears. Families are the place where we hope to find unconditional love, regardless of our performance. One of the features of a secure relationship is we know we can be forgiven for our shortcomings.

However, if you broaden the family circle beyond your spouse and

children to include in-laws or siblings, even those not involved in the business, the pressure and uncertainty rise a bit. Making yourself vulnerable to criticism from in-laws or off-farm siblings is often difficult but can provide a nudge in the right direction. In one family I know, an off-farm sister checks in monthly with her on-farm brother, who has committed himself to achieving certain succession goals. Her role is less task-master and more “chief encourager.” She gives her brother the freedom to express his hopes and frustrations while helping him remember the big picture.

Give permission to your peers. As a peer group facilitator, I witness firsthand the power of a group of friends (who are usually not neighbors) sharing their problems and plans with one another. Each member has a confidential way to see how several others are doing and simultaneously receives feedback from other respected business owners. As a peer group member, you feel obligated to follow through on suggestions, knowing you’ll meet again. If you don’t have anything to show for the months in between those meetings, it can be embarrassing and detrimental to the peer group experience. You won’t want to let others down, and that alone creates forward momentum in your planning efforts.

Engage good advisers. If you’re connected to good advisers, they will take your payment to them as an obligation—a bond—to do everything in their power to move you forward. They won’t make decisions for you, of course, but they will design multiple strategies to accomplish your goals. They will talk to other family members. They will find other resources when they don’t have the answer. They will meet you at your business, in the evening or early in the morning. They can often help you save hundreds of thousands of dollars in estate or income taxes, improve relationships, avoid legal problems and help the business survive one or more generational transitions.

These acts of entrusting yourself to others for your progress will make all the difference in your estate and succession planning efforts this year.

To aid farmers in each step of the succession planning process, the weekly Legacy Moment eNewsletter delivers tips on financial management, family harmony, tax and legal issues and leadership development. To sign up for it and other resources, visit www.FarmJournalLegacyProject.com

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