**Guiding Principles: Difficult Conversations**

By Tanner Ehmke

Communication can be difficult, but it can be even trickier for family businesses navigating the complexities of family politics.

Jim Whitehurst, author of the book *The Open Organization*, writes in The Harvard Business Review that creating a feedback loop and a culture of open dialogue helps businesses have difficult conversations. In his article, Create a Culture Where Difficult Conversations Aren’t so Hard, Whitehurst notes business leaders can role model three behaviors to create a safe environment where everyone feels comfortable having difficult conversations: Show appreciation, open up, and be inclusive early and often.

**Show appreciation.** A great way to start a feedback loop, Whitehurst says, is to begin by recognizing the good work someone has done.

“That’s how you can begin to establish trusting relationships that are strong enough to withstand any constructive criticism that might come along,” he writes.

Mark Lynch, who farms in Texas, western Oklahoma and western Kansas, stresses that with his 18 full-time employees and up to 35 seasonal employees, recognition is crucial for establishing and building relationships.

“You have to surround yourself with good people who have a passion, regardless of their responsibilities,” Mark points out in the Ag Progress June Dispatch. “I’m very fortunate to work with individuals that have been with me for 25 to 30 years.”

**Open up.** Whitehurst stresses that leaders need to lead by example and open up to hear what people are saying. While opening yourself up makes you vulnerable, Whitehurst reminds leaders that you’re demonstrating to others how to process constructive criticism without taking it personally.

Stan Reiss of Southwest Family Farms in Plains, Kansas, stresses in the April Dispatch that opening up and showing emotion has been an important aspect to the success of his family’s multi-generational farm over the years.

“Emotion can help us with decisions,” Stan notes. “The most critical thing in life is how you handle people and how they respond back to you.”

Adds Whitehurst on the importance of listening: “If someone is convinced you’re not listening to them, what makes you think they’ll listen to anything you have to say to them?”

**Be inclusive early and often.** Getting people from all over the organization involved as soon as possible in your decision-making is crucial to building a trusting environment where people are more engaged, Whitehurst writes.

Danny Klinefelter, ag economist at Texas A&M and founder of The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers, echoes that it’s imperative that farm leaders teach a culture of learning. Engaging employees in problem-solving and analysis helps create a culture of learning, he says.

“One of the best management practices is what I call autopsies,” notes Klinefelter in the January Dispatch. “Everyone from the CEO to the successor to the management team periodically sits down and reviews their business plan with questions: Were there things we could or should have done differently even if it was successful? Were we lucky or do we have a process we can repeat? What additional information do we need? The whole idea is to get that information shared between people and get it implemented as quickly as possible.”

“And, you have to have buy-in from everyone instead of the top group just telling everyone down the line,” Danny says of team inclusion on decision-making. “The whole purpose is, ‘What did we learn?’”