



FAMILY BUSINESS MATTERS

Keeping Peace In The Family

Consider these
practices to help
manage conflict.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES / ISTOCK

Of all the challenges you face in your family agriculture business, perhaps none is as potentially destructive as conflict within your family. It creates stress in business and in family interaction. It generates uncertainty about the future. If not handled properly, it can unwind decades of financial and organizational progress.

As Ronald Reagan observed, "Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means." While he may have been referencing international affairs, every family business experiences conflict at some level. The skills to defuse conflict are a critical investment every member should make. Consider several practices that will aid in your approach to conflict:

CONFESS THE CONFLICT. Depending on your personality and how disputes were handled in your home environment, you may seek to avoid conflict at all costs. I've seen many family members shun important conversations in the business out of fear of how some family members will react. They dodge a confrontation in the short run, deferring the

conflict and feelings of frustration until tensions are at an even higher level, and real damage is assured. Acknowledging conflict is facing the reality of being in business together—no different than tough commodity prices or a difficult labor environment.

The sooner everyone admits there is conflict and agrees to work on it, the better.

CONSIDER YOUR CONTRIBUTION. Conflict happens because two or more people have different approaches to specific situations. Each person, pursuing his or her aims, creates potential friction. Whether working side by side with a sibling or in-law, managing staff, determining estate plans or negotiating with landowners, customers or vendors, your every move creates some kind of reaction in someone else. So, before blaming the other person when you are at odds, simply consider how what you did might have been seen by the person you offended. You likely didn't intend to hurt or offend the other person, and that person probably didn't intend to hurt you. If you can both see how your actions contributed to the conflict, you can move toward solutions.

COMMIT TO COMMUNICATE. In the absence of communication, conflict often escalates because of assumptions. A family member who clams up leaves other people guessing about their intentions or concerns. A family member unwilling to meet or talk creates uncertainty about the future and his or her role. If you will commit to communicate, at least others will know where you stand. Sometimes, a problem lies in when or where the communication occurs (in front of others, in the middle of a task or project, without warning, etc.), so when and where you commit to communicate can be an important first step.

CONTEMPLATE THE FUTURE. The most severe conflicts generally have to do with the past—how you were treated in a particular situation. If you can see that pain was not the intention of either party, and if you can begin a dialogue, then begin considering the future. What does the other person need to say or do so you can move forward? What would it look like—how would it benefit the family and the business—if you could move past the conflict? What do you want for the future? Asking such questions begins to build possibilities and options for agreement. It moves you from "what was" to "what can be," which offers a chance to rebuild the relationship.

Managing conflict not only takes an acknowledgement that you have issues but also involves introspection and self-awareness. It requires a willingness to talk and the resolve to look ahead. The shame is not in having conflict but in not dealing with it in your family business. ●



LANCE
WOODBURY

Write Lance Woodbury at Family Business Matters, 2204 Lakeshore Dr., Suite 415, Birmingham, AL 35209, or email lance@agprogress.com