

# Manage Your Succession “Workquake”

“We don’t have any hobbies; all we’ve ever done is work!”

Many readers have heard that phrase—and might have even said it—on more than one occasion. Those with farms and ranches work a great deal, and they have a hard time separating their work from their identity. When you consider the seasonality, intensity, financial risk and physical labor demands of cropping and livestock businesses, along with the passion that many people feel about farming or ranching as a way of life, the idea of having any separation between work and family, not to mention an identity apart from the business, can seem idealistic.

But, when planning for management succession, this overlap creates significant barriers to the transition. “What else will I do? How can I separate the work I love from my identity? If I’m not farming or ranching, who am I?” These questions asked by the senior generation stand squarely in the way of making room for a younger generation of leaders. Consequently, the transition is fraught with assumptions, false starts and disappointment.

With this backdrop, I recently read Bruce Feiler’s 2023 book, “The Search: Finding Meaningful Work in a Post-Career World.” (I reviewed another of his books, “Life Is in the Transitions,” in my column for the *Progressive Farmer* April 2023 issue.) The idea of finding meaningful work amid efforts to transition the business struck me as something many readers of this column might find valuable.

Feiler introduces us to the idea of a “workquake,” a time in your life when your work story changes, when what you do for a living is interrupted in some way. For example, a medical issue could force a change in how you approach work. A divorce or the death of a family member could trigger a workquake. An economic downturn or the opportunity to sell or buy a business might cause you to rethink how you want to work.

A known workquake is at the heart of management succession. The senior generation needs to change its relationship to, and even let go of, the work it has

done for decades. This might include changing from a manager to an employee, retiring to become part-time or seasonal help, or leaving the business altogether. Furthermore, the senior generation’s workquake will force others to reconsider their business roles. For many farms and ranches, the succession workquake may be the most important transition they will ever face.

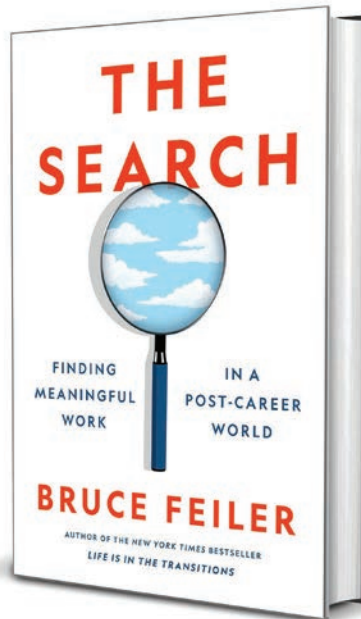
A workquake causes people to search for meaning in their next chapter of life and work. To help find purpose, Feiler suggests a process he calls a “meaning

audit.” It’s a series of questions intended to encourage personal reflection around your notions of work, in which you “excavate the past, probe the present and construct the future.”

Feiler’s questions relate to your earliest values about work and how those were instilled in you, questions about your parents, role models and others who helped you define what work looks like. Another set of questions focuses on your priorities, including your personal goals, the relationships you want to have with your family and friends, and the transcendent causes and communities you care deeply about. By systematically working through six categories of questions across the past,

present and future, you end up with a clearer picture of what the next part of your work story will look like.

Management and ownership transitions are usually one-shot opportunities, and you don’t get much of a chance to practice such a significant workquake. Taking some time to reflect on how you will find meaning in your next chapter of life is a worthwhile endeavor. Feiler’s new book is a gift you should consider giving yourself or a member of your family. ///



Write Lance Woodbury at *Family Business Matters*, 2204 Lakeshore Dr., Suite 415, Birmingham, AL 35209, or email [lance.woodbury@pinionglobal.com](mailto:lance.woodbury@pinionglobal.com)