

# Build Staying Power Into Your Family Farm



**F**amily-owned farms and ranches operate in an environment of substantial risk. Weather events, market volatility, crop or animal diseases, and labor challenges pose existential threats to the business. Individual risks, such as health issues or accidents, can arise without warning to rob us of important relationships and steal our long-held hopes and dreams.

What does resiliency—the capacity to withstand or recover from difficulties—mean in the context of a family working the land together? How does a family partnership bounce back from challenging situations? Consider the following practices and mindsets to help you endure the situations that jeopardize your family business.

**Decide what family cohesion is worth.** Facing difficult business circumstances strains even the best family relationships. Remember the importance of family bonds and how they have helped your business in the past. What best preserves those connections now? Perhaps it requires exiting a part of the business or selling an asset. Maybe someone needs to leave the business to save his or her relationship with you as a family member.

Preserving family unity, even if it brings changes to the business in the short run, helps with the emotional support needed to move forward. On the other hand, if you save the business but lose the family relationships, have you truly succeeded?

**Clarify your options.** There are usually several options when facing difficult circumstances. Having an open and honest conversation about such alternatives, and their benefits and consequences, can help normalize various paths you might take. However, families are often hesitant to consider some options because of family legacy or history.

Resiliency requires withholding phrases like, “We’ve always done it this way” and instead focusing on different ideas and approaches that may help you thrive in the future. Be careful about holding on to the past so tightly that you strangle future opportunities.

**Reframe the situation.** Sometimes, the ability to bounce back from a difficult situation requires changing your view. We’ve all heard people say some burdens were a “blessing in disguise” or that a metaphorical storm

cloud had a “silver lining.” The lessons one learns through difficulty can shape the future of the family business in a positive way. Even in the Bible, years after Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, he reframed how he saw the situation by saying, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” (Genesis 50:20).

In my own family’s experience, when it was clear no one was returning to our ranch, the decision to sell land was reframed from a depressing statement of, “We’ve held it for the last 100 years,” to an enthusiastic expression: “Let’s make sure it goes to a young family who has the potential to own it for the next 100 years.”

**Recall the Stockdale Paradox.** You may remember James Stockdale as Ross Perot’s running mate in the presidential election of 1992. Stockdale’s character was shaped as a prisoner of war during Vietnam, serving for more than seven years as the most senior U.S. officer in the infamous North Vietnamese prison camp nicknamed the “Hanoi Hilton.”

Stockdale is remembered today for his statement on how to face dire circumstances: “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

His point, and the paradox, is that you must be realistic about your difficulties while believing you will get through the situation. Such faith provides the courage to keep going during the most challenging times.

The resilient mindset you bring to your difficulties affects your family for generations to come. Consider your relationships, clarify your options, reframe the situation and keep the faith that you will indeed prevail. ///



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