



Farm & Family Connections: *Involving the Family in Goal Setting & Decision Making*

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For more and more farm families, the traditional command-and-control management style is being replaced by a collaborative and participatory management style that includes everyone involved in the business of the family farm. This is essential for effective goal setting and decision making.

Participatory farm-family management involves everyone in defining goals and objectives that can foster participation in and commitment to the family farm. For the manager of the family farm, the participatory management style requires skills in negotiation and relationship management.

A critical part of relationship management is a basic understanding of individual expectations. Ideally, goals and decisions meet the expectations and needs of all family members, but this is not always the case. However, involving family members in the decision-making process fosters participation and goal achievement.

Consider a situation where a commitment of resources, be it in time, energy, skills, or finances, is made by the primary manager of the family farm, but family members have not had a voice in the decision-making process. If all family members are not willing to devote the resources needed, reaching the desired goal can be difficult or even impossible. The time expended in goal setting and decision making then feels like time wasted. This is frustrating for all involved.

Involving family members in family-farm decisions gives each a voice and allows for the opportunity to work through, clarify, and resolve issues in ways that can best meet everyone's expectations and the needs of all. So you may be saying, "this sounds pretty good, but how do I get started?"

Step 1: Identify the Issue

Before any issue can be addressed, the family must reach a consensus about what the issue is and how it relates to individual expectations and family values.

- Does everyone see the problem the same way?
- Do all family members understand the issue?
- Have family members shared their opinions and expectations?
- In which areas are there agreement/disagreement?
- What family values are most important to the situation?

Step 2: Generate Alternative Strategies

The process of generating alternative strategies involves listing all possibilities and includes seeking additional guidance when necessary.

- Has everyone had a chance to generate strategies for addressing the issue?
- What resources, expertise, and guidance are available for exploring additional options?
- What benefits and consequences are associated with each option? In other words, has the family evaluated the cost and benefit of each strategy?

Step 3: Choose the “Best” Strategy

Choosing the best strategy is easy when all family members agree, but what about when they don't? Remember, the best strategy is an alternative that offers the *most* benefits at the least *cost* for each family member.

- Can family members reach a consensus on one course of action knowing that there are other possible alternatives?
- If agreement is not possible now, have family members determined a future time for reaching a consensus?
- What additional resources or guidance can be sought to help family members make a decision?
- Can all family members agree to try one strategy for a limited time, and can they be open and flexible to alternative strategies?
- Are all family members willing to accept responsibility for the decision?
- Once reaching a decision, how do family members feel about the process and the decision that has been reached?

Step 4: Develop an Action Plan

Once they have made a decision, even if only a temporary one, family members must develop an action plan and ways to evaluate its effectiveness.

- What does the family ultimately want to achieve?
- What activities must the family carry out to achieve the final goal?
- Who will be responsible for carrying out the plan, and what are their specific responsibilities?
- Are there other decisions that the family needs to make as a result of the selected strategy?
- When will the family evaluate the plan's effectiveness? In other words, when do family members check to see how they're doing?

Sources & Resources

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