



Farm & Family Connections: *Communication in the Family*

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Communication, although essential, is not always easy. Individual differences in personality, communication styles and skills, and expectations all play a part in how well your family communicates. Sometimes you'll find it is best to let issues rest before trying to communicate. Other times, however, issues can't be allowed to rest, because lack of communication can interfere with daily living. After all, every family is a team, and this is particularly true of families with family farms. They must communicate effectively in order to manage their farms effectively.

Just as you, the manager of your family farm, must communicate and negotiate with employees, suppliers, processors/merchandisers, lenders, landlords, and providers of money or land in any given day, you must communicate with those family members directly or indirectly affected by farm-family issues and decisions. And it's equally important that they communicate with you. Successful families operate systematically, much as do successful farms.

Each family member plays different roles in the family and in the management of the family farm. Each of these roles carries with it different responsibilities and expectations. But sometimes one person sees his or her roles and responsibilities in one way, while others see them very differently. Different perceptions and expectations can lead to a great deal of confusion and frustration.

Communication allows for discussion and clarification of roles, responsibilities, and expectations that can lead to more effective, collaborative, and supportive relationships within the family. And, when the farm family is functioning effectively, the family-farm business functions more effectively.

Effective Communication

So, what is effective communication? The best way to answer that question is to break the concept down. Effective communication involves interpersonal skills, rapport with others, and active listening.

- **Interpersonal Skills**

Interpersonal skills enable us to interact with others. Effective interpersonal communication involves putting people at ease, respecting others' opinions and capabilities, and encouraging the sharing of feelings and perceptions.

- **Rapport**

To develop rapport with others is to develop a connection, a relationship, or an understanding with them. To do this, you should signal that you are open to the thoughts and opinions of others. You should express an interest in what others have to say in a friendly and open manner.

- **Active Listening**

Active listening encourages others to continue interacting. As an active listener, you can demonstrate your interest in what is being said using both verbal and nonverbal communication techniques.

 - **Rephrasing**

 - Rephrasing what you have heard is an effective technique. For example, a family member says, "It bothers me when you commit me to do something before asking if I am available." You can reply, "I understand what you are saying; it upsets you when I commit your time without checking with you first." Thus, you make sure you have clearly understood what you have heard, and you validate the speaker and his or her message.

 - **Tone of Voice**

 - Your tone of voice can determine the effect of your message. For example, if you try to communicate your anger or unhappiness, but do so in a light and jovial manner, your listener may miss your point. Your tone of voice should match the message you're trying to convey. Varying the pitch to demonstrate excitement or disappointment can help your listener to hear the intent of the message.

 - **Nonverbal Cues**

 - Just as what you say and how you say it are important to effective communication, nonverbal cues can also add to or detract from your message. For example, leaning toward the speaker, nodding, and smiling all convey interest in and understanding of what is being said. In contrast, looking away, shuffling your feet, looking at a watch or clock, or turning away when someone is speaking can be perceived as lack of interest in or uneasiness with the person or message.

Beyond Effective Communication

At times, even effective communication fails to achieve a desirable outcome. In those cases, outside help, guidance, or support can be helpful. You may seek support through your church, a community agency, or close friend. However, factors such as individual personality, upbringing, and culture can influence how comfortable families feel sharing private concerns with others. For families conditioned to believe that personal problems should remain private, seeking outside help may seem virtually impossible.

Sometimes, it can help to think about reaching out as strength. Consider how you would feel if someone reached out to you in need. Reaching out to others can be a real comfort and help when times are tough.

Sources & Resources

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