

Passing the reins

Changing management may prove hard for some ranchers

BY TERESA CLARK
FOR THE FENCE POST

At some point on most ranch operations, there is a difficult conversation that needs to take place. In fact, management transition can be one of the biggest challenges some ranchers will ever face.

“The most difficult part in beginning these conversations is how to begin,” said John Hewlett, a farm and ranch specialist with the University of Wyoming. “There are always challenges involving human emotions and relationships over past conflicts that make these conversations difficult.”

If they aren’t addressed, some of these challenges can become an integral part of the functioning of

the family and ranching operation, Hewlett said. “Difficult conversations are any conversations that you find challenging to get involved in, and stir up emotions and past conflicts over a topic. It can also be a conversation you or the person you care about are both passionate about.”

No matter what the difficulty might be, there are some main conversations to have that could help underline the main topic. The first is

the “what happened” conversation. Both parties may wrestle with what happened, when the event took place, and what was said.

Another is the “feelings” conversation, which is how the feelings we have influence how we interpret what’s being said, and an assessment of what’s going on. It also influences how we reacted to what was said. “The question becomes, should I express my feelings to someone and hope for a better outcome,” Hewlett said.

Next is identifying the conversation, which is calling into question our competency, he said. “We question things like whether or not we are worthy of love. Am I a good or bad person? Do you look inward and wonder whether things will work out okay. It calls into question our self worth.”

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Hewlett cautions producers to avoid mistakes that can hinder progress in having difficult conversations.

Intentions versus impact happens when making assumptions about the other person's intentions based on the impact it has had on us. "We start making assumptions of what the other person means, how that impacts us, and how it will affect us," he said. "We assume the worst giving us license to make assumptions. We treat ourselves charitably by trying to explain our own behavior in a defensive mode. For example, my boss told me I did a bad job, but I did a bad job because my wife is sick. Bad intentions may become self-fulfilling, because we start behaving in a way that goes along with that," he said.

Starting a difficult conversation can be a challenge. "Try holding in your view or hypothesis until you work through what's going on, and until it's proven where the other person is coming from," Hewlett said. "Identify what their intentions may be. You also might share the impact on you of what they said, and ask them what their intentions are. They may not understand what impact their words have on you."

Even if a person's intentions are good, their intentions may not have a good impact on the other person. "Sometimes, we have no idea that is the case," Hewlett said. "Don't ignore the complexity of their intentions. You may aggravate hostility by expressing or forcing our intentions on them. It's important to listen to other's words and feelings. "The hurt your words caused may be evident in their reaction," he said.

Blaming others rarely gets a positive response. "Maybe it comes from early responses to bullying on the playground, but blaming others makes it difficult to understand the contribution each side has made to the difficult conversation," Hewlett said. "When we blame someone else, it is all about blaming the other person and building evidence against them."



Hewlett



Carter

"If we can change that, and start thinking about each person's contribution or input, we can start looking at a better level of understanding, and go forward to resolve the problem or situation," he added. "Engage instead of pointing fingers."

POSITIVE APPROACH

UW Extension Educator Caleb Carter encourages producers to take a proactive approach to resolution. "Ask yourself if you should just raise the topic, or is there another way to approach it? Then, consider if there is a different way you could react to change your part in it. Maybe the conflict is inside of you," he said.

Carter sees value in creating a learning conversation, because once all parties get past the mistakes and down to the problem, they will have a better chance solving it.

"We always want to approach stories from our side, but have you ever considered approaching them from a third party's perspective — like as a mediator or non-objective third party? Try taking yourself out of the picture, and understand where both sides are coming from," Carter said.

Don't use words like "You always" or "You never." "You are not being non-objective when you use words like that," Carter said. "Instead, extend the invitation for the conversation and set the mood. Describe your purpose from a non-objective point of view. What that does is raise the issue and your concern about it without any type of finger-pointing."

Problem-solving is about understanding where the other person is coming from, Carter said. "The idea is to rephrase what they say to show you understand the situation from their point of view. If the other person thinks you are genuinely listening, they may be more willing to share and listen to your point of view. It takes two to agree. Identify the issue or concern, and work together to resolve it," he said. ❖

— Clark is a freelance livestock journalist from western Nebraska. She can be reached by email at tlarklivenews@gmail.com.