

Why Grow Relationships with the Next Generation?

By Caleb Carter, UW Agriculture and Horticulture Educator

Janelle has always enjoyed the farm. She grew up helping as much as she could. Fencing, running the tractor, stacking hay; whatever needed to be done. She also enjoyed raising and showing sheep in 4H and FFA. After college she came back to the farm to raise her family and to help her parents as they got older. She married a young man, Josh, who was excited about joining her on the farm and becoming part of the operation.

Josh and Janelle feel they should have more of a say about the farm after working with her parents for the past 15 years. But lately, Josh has been complaining that he feels more like a hired hand than a partner. Anytime there are decisions to be made, Janelle and Josh feel left out of the discussions. Despite Josh and Janelle offering several ideas for ways they could generate additional income or make management changes that could help them become more competitive, Janelle's parents always prefer to stick with how things have been done in the past.

Janelle thinks a lot about how much she enjoyed growing up on the farm and wants the same for her children, but feels torn when trying to work with her parents and with Josh. How can they find common ground while helping her parents feel they are not trying to take over? How can the parents grow those relationships that are so critical to the success of the family and the farm?



Managing Intergenerational Relationships

Janelle and Josh are not alone in this struggle. Statistics show a steady rise in the average age of American farmers over past decades. The average age of the U.S. ag operator is 58 years and has been steadily rising for the past 30 years. Even the second and third operators are increasing in age, and at a faster rate, Figure 1.

Figure 1: Average age of U.S. farm operators, 2007 to 2012

Average Age of Farm Operators, 2007 and 2012

Operator	2007 (years)	2012	% change
Principal	57.1	58.3	2.1*
Second	51.4	53.4	3.9*
Third	44.6	46.0	3.1*
All	54.9	56.3	2.6*

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

*Statistically significant change.

Viewing these statistics, the question often comes up "Who will take over as this generation continues to age?" Perhaps we should consider this from another perspective. These statistics also show reiterate something else, which is that many of our family farms or ranches include multiple generations. Maybe instead of focusing on the transfer, we should be thinking about building these relationships now. Which later can help lead to a smoother transition.

Intergenerational Challenges

There are many challenges to managing the relationships between generations in any family. But consider that the farm or ranch family is unique as a business entity. Often agricultural families are more involved and work more closely than other family business arrangements.



Family members growing up in different eras also have had different experiences and challenges that shape their perspectives, goals, and expectations. This can lead to opposing expectations of the operation and the roles that each family member should play.

Stress can arise from many operational issues in agriculture, such as an untimely equipment breakdown during harvest or a sudden drop in commodity prices. The stresses of family life can also have a tremendous effect where multiple generations are working together, such as a couple with marital problems or the strain of raising teenage children. Other sources of stress reported by surveys of farmers and ranchers include money issues, not feeling involved in decisions, and feeling more like a “hired hand” than a partner. Overwhelmingly, the biggest source of stress is the transfer of the farm or ranch to the next generation. This may be due, in part, to the fact that transferring the farm or ranch to the next generation involves all the above-mentioned stressors in a single package.

Address the Stress

Each family member feels stress differently. While all family members often feel the strain of a tight money situation, mothers and fathers often feel they must assume a greater share of the load when considering who shares the risk (and the blame) in disputes over spending. Mothers and daughters-in-law will often describe feeling stressed where they do not feel involved in the operation. The younger (incoming) generation frequently express that they feel stressed because they are not on their own and able to make their own decisions. Furthermore, one of the greatest sources of marital and intergenerational stress is the lack of a good working relationship, where the son or daughter-in-law doesn't feel involved in making decisions in the operation.

One of the most important ways to address these challenges is to establish a culture of open communication, one where everyone feels free to express themselves as appropriate. Where family members are involved from multiple generations, each needs the opportunity to share their thoughts and perspectives on the operation. They also want to feel that they are heard and that their opinions matter.

Acknowledging and understanding the feelings and opinions of family members is also important to helping each individual feel heard and included. This should be practiced by all family members, not just the founders. Communication should be respectful and all should try to be understanding and sensitive to the perspective of others in the family.

Holding family meetings and family business meetings can provide a way for thoughts to be shared and decisions to be made in a more open and inclusive manner. For more on holding family meetings and family business meetings, refer to the AG LEGACY module titled “How are you communicating with the next generation”, available at AGLEGACY.org.

In addition to open communication, other important coping strategies include making decisions democratically rather than in an authoritative manner, planning ahead for stressors that accompany particular stages in the family cycle, reducing blame, and putting emphasis on spending quality time together as a family.





Moving Forward

Regardless of what sources of stress your family is facing, the best approach for addressing it is to identify any potential issues and be open about them. Allow family members to share frustrations openly by creating an environment where they feel comfortable and safe to do so.

Here are some strategies to help you get started:

- Write down personal, family, and work goals for three months, six months and a lifetime.
- Take time to ponder what you want, and practice healthy stress management techniques
- Enhance your communication and negotiation skills. Use fewer 'You' statements ("You never come to meals on time") and more 'I' statements ("When you're late for a meal, I feel angry.") Experiment with the following strategy: When you _____ (describe the behavior), I feel _____ (irritated, angry, sad, depressed, etc.) What I want from you is _____ (describe the behavior). What I'm willing to do is _____ (and work to negotiate a mutually satisfying solution). Also, check what the other person heard you say: "Would you tell me what you heard me say?"
- Take time to reflect on examples when your family has been able to work through a problem. What approach worked? What didn't? Make a list of successful strategies.
- If the family is struggling with these skills, it may help to get assistance from a mediator or other professional who can support your family as you develop the foundational skills such as communication, trust-building, problem-solving, negotiation, goal-setting and strategic planning.

Janelle's parents talked about goals and desires for the family farm, but were never able to come to any conclusions. Whenever Josh or Janelle brought up or suggested new ideas or opportunities, they would argue about it for hours on end with no consensus. This left everyone frustrated and resulted in things being done in exactly the same way they had always been done. For this reason, Josh and Janelle felt like their relationship with Janelle's parents had not only failed to grow but had begun to decline over the past 15 years.



This is a common experience for many family farm and ranch operations. But it is important to understand and remember that there is another and better way. Creating an environment of open communication and involving everyone in that exchange can be a great start to helping make everyone feel a part of the operation. In addition, finding a method to involve the next generation in important business decisions can go a long way toward improving long-term relationships and preserving the family operation.

Following a strategy for growing better relationships in your family may even open up new opportunities, as well as build a stronger foundation to help the family and the business weather the storms of life ahead. How are you growing your relationships with the other generations on the farm or ranch?

An online module, including a recorded presentation covering growing relationships with the next generation, and other information on developing your management succession plan is available at our website. For more on upcoming modules, past newsletters, and for information about Ag Legacy see AgLegacy.org. Requests for additional information may be emailed to Information@AgLegacy.org.



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