

Should Forgiveness Have A Place in Your Ag Legacy?

By John Hewlett, UW Ranch/Farm Management Specialist

Eory and his sister Sandra never did get along well. Once they were married, those past conflicts were transferred to their spouses and children, effectively poisoning the relationship between the two families. This would have been bad enough, but when they lost their mother in a tractor accident and Dad died of grief just a few months later, it left the future of the three-generation farm and the rest of the family in complete turmoil. Could the resulting legal battles have been avoided? What about the legacy Mom and Dad had so carefully laid the ground work for with their elaborate estate plan and scheme to pass-on voting rights to keep all family members involved for generations to come? Is there another way?

Conflict

Conflict is a fact of family life. According to the Family Firm Institute, 20 percent of family businesses report weekly conflict, another 20 percent report monthly conflict, and 42 percent report conflict three to four times per year. You can draw your own conclusions about the 18 percent who report no conflict at all.

Conflict is a clash of interests, values, actions, views or directions. Disagreement

among people is the underlying basis of conflict. People disagree because they see things differently, want different things, have thinking styles which encourage them to disagree, or are predisposed to disagree. It is rare to hear someone describe conflict in a positive way; for example, saying “Our family just went through a positive conflict to reach a new, improved level of trust with one another.”

However, not all conflicts are full-on war. There are many levels to conflict between individuals, whether they are family members or not. Conflicts vary depending on the nature of the issues involved, the relationship between the persons involved, the context, and the means used to wage the struggle. These elements can all affect the degree to which a conflict will be destructive or constructive.



Conflicts can be resolved

Conflicts can be defused and even resolved. De-escalation is an effort to reduce either the severity or scope (or both) of a standing conflict. When considering the best strategy for resolving a conflict, keep the following points in mind, as suggested by Rob Sandelin:

- Not everyone has the same level of commitment, honesty, or even integrity.
- It is important to define a process that resolves the problem and encourages the parties to talk about the issues in a controlled and reasonable way, even if those issues are intensely personal.
- Many people are conditioned to avoid conflict at any cost, that conflict is bad, a failure. Overcoming this tendency to avoid conflict is hard and conflict resolution training is a good first step.
- One of the most important elements of all successful families and family businesses is a clearly defined process for dealing with group and personal conflicts.
- Sometimes conflicts can't be resolved and must simply be respectfully accepted as differences.

A recent Ag Legacy Newsletter titled "Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?" points out that each difficult conversation is made up of three, distinct conversations: 1. the What

Happened? Conversation; 2. the Feelings Conversation; and 3. the Identity Conversation. Each of these conversations runs concurrently when conflicts arise and understanding what is going on can help us to better address the issues head-on.

What About Forgiveness?

Writers for *Psychology Today*, suggest that forgiveness is the conscious and deliberate decision to release resentment or anger. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean reconciliation. The person who forgives is not required to return to the same pattern of relationship or accept the same harmful behaviors from another. In addition, forgiveness is critically important for the mental health of anyone who has been harmed or victimized. It allows people to move forward, rather than holding them back to reexperience a past injustice or injury.

Rose Sweet suggests that one reason we resist forgiving is that we don't really understand what forgiveness is or how it works. We think we do, but we don't. Most of us assume that if we forgive others who have offended us, it is the same as letting them off the hook and then they get to go about their merry way, while we unfairly suffer from their actions. Further, we might also think that we are required to be friendly with them again or to pick up with the old relationship where we left off. While God commands us to forgive others, that does not mean we are expected to continue trusting those who broke trust with us.

Granting Forgiveness

- Forgiveness is not letting the offender off the hook.
- Forgiveness does not mean we must continue to be the victim.
- Forgiveness is not the same as reconciling. We can forgive someone even if we cannot bring ourselves to get along with them again.
- Forgiveness is a process, not an event.
- Forgetting does not mean denying reality or ignoring repeated offenses.
- Forgiveness is not based on others' actions but on our attitude and state of mind.
- Withholding forgiveness is a refusal to let go of perceived power.
- Be careful not to forgive too quickly in order to avoid pain or, worse, to manipulate the situation.
- Watch that you are not simply covering up the wounds and holding back the necessary healing process.
- Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.
- Forgiveness starts with a mental decision. The emotional part of forgiveness is finally being able to let go of the resentment.



Forgiveness is a journey and the first step is understanding what forgiveness is and what it is not. The next step is giving yourself permission to forgive and forget, letting go of the bitterness while always keeping very clearly in mind your rights to healthy boundaries.

Benefits of Forgiving and Moving on

Forgiveness has been shown to elevate mood, enhance optimism and guard against anger, stress, anxiety and depression. Carrying the hurt or anger of an offense leads the body to release stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Eliminating the perpetual flow of those hormones may also explain why forgiveness provides physical health benefits, such as lowering the risk of high blood pressure and heart problems, S. Konrath, et al.

Forgiveness is an act of the imagination. It dares you to imagine a future based on the possibility that your hurt will not be the final word on the matter. It challenges you to give up your destructive thoughts and to believe in the possibility of a better future. It builds confidence that you can survive the pain and grow from it. Simply identify the situation to be forgiven and ask yourself, “Am I willing to waste even more energy on this issue?” If not, then that’s it! It does not mean you will forget what happened or that the person is not responsible for what he/she did or that you need to bring him/her back into your life.

Telling someone is a bonus! Making a verbal statement “I forgive you” is not required to begin the process that heals the hurt. It has little or nothing to do with another person because forgiveness is an internal matter. To forgive another simply means you no longer allow another person’s actions or words to cause you resentment, anger or pain. Forgiveness is the experience of finding peace inside and can neither be compelled nor blocked by another. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.



Forgiveness is a creative act that changes us from prisoners of the past to liberated people at peace with our memories. It is not forgetfulness but does involve accepting the promise that the future can be more than dwelling on memories of past injury. To not forgive another person is like taking the poison (continuing to suffer for what they did or didn’t do to you) and then expecting THEM to die!

Leaving a Legacy Through Forgiveness

All families experience interpersonal conflicts. It is not a matter of if, but a matter of when. Anytime you put two or more people together for more than ten minutes, you run the risk of interpersonal conflict. Many times, conflicts arise over a failure to practice good communication or where communication has broken down.

Everyone involved must communicate effectively to successfully establish a legacy for future generations. Both the founders and the incoming generation must understand the processes and basic skills that make up human communication, including questioning, listening, explaining and reflecting. In addition to the verbal aspects, non-verbal communi-



Intergenerational Relationships: Improving Communication

Practice Forgiveness

"When you *action*, I felt *emotion*. I would have preferred you *action*. But you did not. I have let myself feel *emotion* and held on to my demand that you should have said or done something differently. Now, I choose to no longer hold onto the tension and hurt that accompanies this memory. I cancel the demands, expectations and conditions I placed on you to *action*. You are totally responsible for your own actions and deeds. Now I give you my acceptance as a human being, just as you are".

person. Visualize filling in the blanks with words that feel most appropriate to you. When you are done, you may want to write this down and practice speaking the words out loud.

We will all leave a legacy whether we plan to or not. You might consider forgiveness if the legacy you leave behind is more important to you than making sure that you keep the conflict going to the bitter end. Remember, forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself and your legacy.

Portions of this article are taken from an online course entitled *A Lasting Legacy* - Course 1 by Rodney Sharp, John P. Hewlett, and Jeffrey E. Tranel, 2007.

The course is available free of charge at AGLEGACY.org > Learning.



Resources:

“DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?” |

Ag Legacy Newsletter. | <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/news>.

“Interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution.” Rob Sandelin. |

<https://www.ic.org/wiki/interpersonal-relationships-and-conflict-resolution>.

“Forgiveness and Restoration.” Rose Sweet. | <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/forgiveness-and-restoration>.

“What Is Forgiveness?” S. Konrath, et al. | Psychology Today. | <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/forgiveness>.

Online modules, including recorded presentations covering how to establish an AG LEGACY and other helpful information on management succession plans are available at our website. For more on upcoming modules, past newsletters, and for other information about Ag Legacy see AgLegacy.org. Requests for additional information may be emailed to Information@AgLegacy.org.



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