

Why is Trust Important in an Ag Legacy?

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It had taken a long time but Kyle had finally convinced his dad to let him take over management of the north section, consisting of a pivot and a 40-acre pasture. Kyle had big plans for the irrigated ground. Kyle felt like his ideas were continuously shot down, since graduating from college and returning to help on the farm. Now, his dad was finally giving him a chance to show that he had some good ideas too.

But that all disappeared when Kyle saw his dad in the tractor yesterday, tilling HIS field! He got so angry that he drove up and started yelling at his dad. He said some things that, though he regretted it now, were still circling around in his head. He had stormed off before his dad had a chance to talk to him about it.

The thing that Kyle kept coming back to, as his heated feelings subsided, was the obvious fact that his dad simply didn't trust him. It had taken so long and Kyle thought he had finally convinced his dad that he had good ideas too. He felt the trust he had built up begin to dissolve and was left frustrated and confused.



Importance of Trust

One definition of trust is: "Firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something." But Rousseau et al. 1998 offer a more in-depth definition based in part on accepting your own vulnerability when trusting someone: "Trust is a positive psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another."



Lewicki et al. 1998 describe trust as compelling us to act based on our perceptions of another: "An individual's belief in, and willingness to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another."

These descriptions offer several important characteristics of trust. 1. The level of trust one is willing to invest in a relationship relates to our perceptions and assumptions of how another person will act. 2. We accept a level of vulnerability when we choose to trust another.

Bonior describes vulnerability in building trust. Being members of a family unit already introduces a level of vulnerability. Allowing yourself to expand this vulnerability into the business side of a family business can help to open a new level of trust. Sharing expectations, frustrations, and dreams not only for yourself, but also for the family farm or ranch operation can open entirely new levels of communication.

One way to do this is to have family members write their own Christmas letter, looking ahead 5, 10, even 20 years into the future. Where do they see themselves, the family, and the family operation? Share these letters with one another and use it as an opportunity to talk about goals, expectations, and dreams.

Trust also goes together with respect. We are often more likely to lash out at those we are closest to. Making it even more important to emphasize respect in our close relationships. However, we must also be willing to give our family members the benefit of the doubt. We all have bad days and it is essential to be able to look past it when family members are experiencing one themselves.

It is also important for the family to outline ways of discussing difficult feelings and concerns, without shouting, verbally attacking, or shutting down the conversation. Open, honest communication can be difficult, but can also be rewarding. The relationships built through such an approach can also transfer to the family business. For more information on having difficult conversations, see the Ag Legacy Module: “Difficult Conversations, How do we Discuss What Really Matters?” at AgLegacy.org.

A lack of communication is still communication

Action or inaction can speak volumes. Beginning the process of building or rebuilding trust may be as simple as a handshake and an invitation to talk. The other person may want the same thing but is unsure about where to start or if anyone even cares. It takes someone to be the catalyst to begin the process, someone who can lead people to develop trust. The catalyst may even be someone not in the family business. Often, however, that someone is the mother in the family.



Assuming we know how someone will act or react in a given situation, even before giving them the chance to act for themselves, is another challenge when two people know each other well. This attitude locks the other person into a particular behavior and does not allow them to change. Open, honest communication and vulnerability involve letting go of previous perceptions and allowing for change and new expectations.

Kacie LaChapelle, a family therapist and business consultant, talks about signals in relationships. We constantly give off signals that indicate whether we are feeling trusting or not. Take time to read the other person's signals. Are they sending signals of mistrust? Also be aware of the signals you are sending. Instead of a defensive response, listen and respond to the other person's feelings. That legitimizes their feelings and provides an opportunity for them to respond.

Full Circle

How might Kyle approach his dad to express his feelings and seek to rebuild a relationship of trust? Is it important to recognize the part that trust plays in your family interactions? Does trust have a place in your family's Ag Legacy? What steps do you take to foster trust in your relationships?



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