

How Do you Keep Manipulation Out of Your Ag Legacy?

By Caleb Carter, consultant to the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics in the University of Wyoming College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Alex wasn't sure what to think anymore. He'd worked so hard to keep the ranch going after dad died two years ago. Lately, he felt more and more like he was failing. The sudden heart attack was a big shock and, although they discussed ideas for Alex taking over the ranch someday, at 55 dad was still very active and made most of the decisions himself.

Cheryl, Alex's wife, has been pressuring him to sell the ranch and move on. Alex realizes she doesn't exactly like "ranch life" but he had always thought she would come around.

After 5 years of marriage and life on the farm, she is now even more insistent. Last night she confronted him again saying he doesn't know what he is doing and that he is only holding on for sentimental reasons. She argues that is no way to run a business and told him that selling the ranch would allow them to have the life they always wanted. She concluded with the question, "Doesn't he want her to be happy?"

Holding onto the family ranch has always been Alex's dream, but more and more Cheryl's arguments are starting to hit home. Alex feels torn as he thinks about his dad's dreams, as well as his mom's desire to keep the ranch in the family. Another big problem is that mom isn't able to manage on her own. What should Alex do? Should his feelings matter in this decision?



Identifying manipulation

There are many appealing factors that can make the family farm or ranch a way of life, one that many want to hang on to. The opportunity to work together is an important component, as well as the freedom of working outside on your own land and making your own decisions.

It can be more difficult to make decisions about the future of the farm or ranch, as the family grows to include multiple generations. This can also lead to disagreements, arguing, and hurt feelings. Those involved may get to a point where they have widely different views on the big decisions such as how to transition the farm or ranch to the next generation or if the family should just sell the operation. These situations may lead family members to attempt to manipulate others in an attempt to get their way.

Manipulation might be defined as any attempt to sway another person's emotions to get them to act in a specific way or feel a certain thing. It can sometimes be difficult to identify if you are experiencing manipulation, as it can be very subtle. Some key identifiers of manipulation include positive answers to the following questions:

- Do you often feel tricked or pressured into doing things?
- Does it often seem as if you can't do anything right?
- Does it seem like it is becoming impossible to say no?
- Does the other person often twist the truth?
- Do you often feel guilty or confused?
- Do your efforts never seem good enough?

Some common manipulation strategies

Manipulation can occur in a variety and often subtle ways. Even so, this type of behavior typically follows a set pattern based on the individual's objectives or concerns. It often revolves around the other person's emotions or using guilt or blame as weapons. Some specific examples of common manipulation strategies have been identified by Raypole and include the following:

Invalidation of feelings. When someone is trying to manipulate another person, they might try to convince them that their feelings aren't important. They may do this by interrupting or talking over them, dismissing their concerns, or telling them how they should feel. As a person comes to believe their feelings aren't important, it can spill over into other relationships and make them more susceptible to further manipulation.

Emotional blackmail. This also plays off someone's feelings. The line follows a common pattern where the manipulator makes a demand and if the other person refuses, they will pressure them into giving in through flattery or threats. When the person complies, they reward with kindness and affection. This will often lead to further manipulation as the person becomes more susceptible to their tactics.

Gaslighting. This can occur when the aggressor attempts to convince someone that something didn't happen, such as an abuse or other negative experience. They attempt to distort another person's sense of reality, making them question their memory.

Guilt-tripping. Guilt isn't always malicious. Feeling guilty for something we did wrong can help motivate us to make amends or change behavior. However, when a person uses guilt to make another feel bad or do something they would rather not do, this is a form of manipulation.

Withholding affection. Giving someone the silent treatment or avoiding them altogether can be a form of manipulation when it is used as a way to punish someone or make them fearful.

Victimhood. People can also manipulate others by taking on the role of a victim. Blaming others for their difficulties and downplaying their own responsibility. Often turning situations around and blaming the other person.

Aggression or personal attacks. Manipulation can take a more direct approach through shaming, mocking, or intimidation. The person trying to manipulate may rationalize their actions by referring to it as tough love or asking the other person why they can't take a joke or telling them to stop being so sensitive.

Shifting the goal posts. Continually shifting the criteria that one must meet in order to please another is also a form of manipulation. It can leave the other person feeling like they are never good enough or don't deserve their respect.

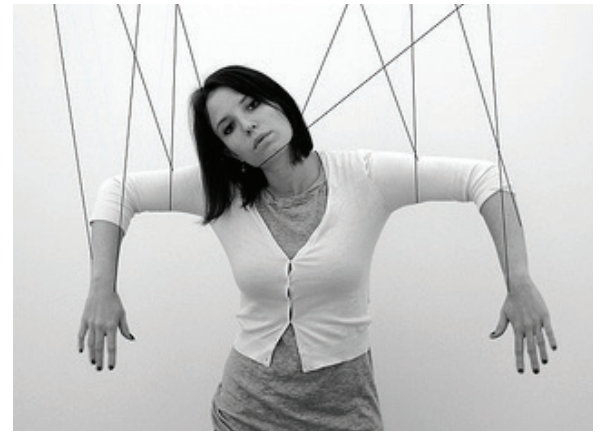
Why do people manipulate others?

As we can see, manipulation can take many forms. But not all manipulation has malicious intent. Making eye contact and offering a smile can help increase the likelihood of making a human connection, for example. We are bombarded on a daily basis by messaging trying to sway our thoughts and convictions through advertising trying to get us to buy products or to vote a certain way.

- When someone attempts to intentionally manipulate someone else, it is often because they are taking the easy path or are trying to avoid vulnerability. Villines identifies additional reasons that people might manipulate:
- Poor communication skills. This might be a learned behavior or is a result of a lack of more direct communication skills.
- A desire to avoid connection. Seeking to control others as part of a narcissistic personality.
- Fear. Fear can be a strong motivator. Fear of abandonment, for example, can lead someone to manipulate another person during breakups or fights.
- Defensiveness. Defensiveness can be a way for insecure people to deflect attention away from themselves and onto someone else. Manipulation becomes a way to avoid blame.
- Social norms. These can be a motivator to act a certain way in social settings. Such as being cheerful and polite at work.

Are you are manipulating others?

You may find, after some reflection, that you are guilty of manipulating others. How can you avoid falling into this





trap yourself? Regan identifies 9 ways that you might be manipulative without realizing it:

- You go to great lengths to get your way
- You have a hard time voicing your needs directly
- You project onto others
- You lie
- You make people feel guilty
- You don't keep promises
- You do nice things-with expectations
- You punish people when you don't get your way
- You are overly persuasive

Do any of these sound familiar? The list has many similarity to the earlier list of manipulation strategies. It is important, when considering if manipulation is going on in your relationships, to also think through if you might be part of the problem.

Responding to manipulation

What can you do to address the manipulation if you believe it is happening to you? Begin by calling out the manipulation. Calling out the action brings it front and center and lets them know that you are not okay with the behavior you have identified, whether the person is aware of their manipulation or not.

Next, help them understand how it makes you feel. You can do this by using "I" statements, that allow you to express your feelings in a non-confrontational manner. For example, you could say "When you _____, I feel _____". Other steps you can use to help them understand include:

- Acknowledge their perspective
- Express your anger and hurt in a calm and polite way
- Explain how the manipulation affects you and the relationship

Clearly state boundaries that protect you by dictating what you will and won't do. Make it clear that you won't tolerate manipulation. It can also be helpful to discuss what is happening with another trusted person. Maybe another family member, a spouse, a friend, or a trusted mentor. Having someone else who understands and validates your feelings can be big relief. Your support person may also offer advice or brainstorm alternatives. For more on how to discuss feelings check out our newsletter entitled *Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters?* at aglegacy.org.

How to stop being a manipulator

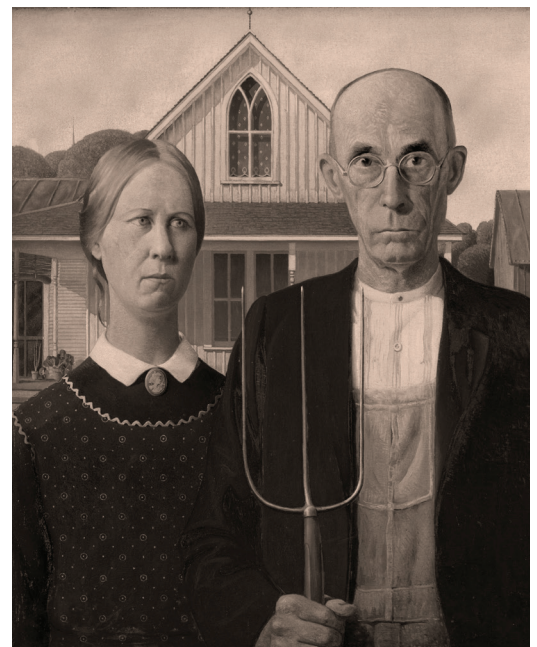
This is similar to calling out another's manipulation. Begin by calling out yourself. Identify what pain might be causing you to act in this way. What are you trying to hide? Next, ask yourself how you can take care of yourself in the face of this pain? Strive to interact from a healthier place.

Manipulation can be a pattern of behavior or habit, making it difficult recognize and overcome. However, change is not impossible. Be honest not only with yourself, but also those around you who may have experienced or may in the future experience your manipulation. Give them permission to call you out nicely if they notice it. Also, working with a therapist can help you overcome these struggles. It may even require couples therapy to help mend broken relationships or change behavior (Regan).

Manipulation in your Ag Legacy

Not all manipulation necessarily has malicious intent behind it. However, anytime someone uses manipulation to sway another's feelings or convictions it is not acceptable. It is easy for feelings to get heated and for people to be hurt when discussing things such as money or decision-making power. This is especially true when discussion turns to the transition of the farm/ranch from one generation to the next.

Working together on the family farm or ranch can be very rewarding but can also be a source of stress and frustration. People may have different ideas or objectives that can lead to manipulation. They may be trying to gain control, sway others to a different direction, or maybe push someone out. On the other hand, they might simply be feeling threatened or insecure and are unsure how else to respond. They may not even be conscious of what they are doing.



Is Cheryl manipulating Alex? What might be some of the reasons behind her actions? How can Alex address this with her? Should he express his concerns? What types of manipulation do you see in your own relationships?

Other Resources and References

Additional resources to help improve communication are learning better negotiation skills or seeking outside help through mediation. Negotiation skills aren't just for the car lot. They can also be helpful in working together when contentious topics arise in the family. For more on negotiation skills, see negotiation.farmmanagement.org.

Mediation can help address contentious issues and a lack of communication by helping both sides to be heard. For more on mediation explore the Wyoming Department of Agriculture Mediation Program: wyagric.state.wy.us/divisions/nrp/mediation-program or similar resources in your state.

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