

Finding Peace In Your Ag Legacy

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Barbara was at her wits end. The tension had been getting progressively worse over the last couple of years, but now has reached a new high; she just didn't know what else to do. Yesterday, her son Richard came to work in a huff. He was frustrated about comments his younger brother Steven made last night. Their relationship had been growing worse, and lately it was beginning to spill over into the family ranch operation.

Last week Richard was scheduled to help Steven doctor calves but he never showed up. A couple of weeks before that Richard had asked Steven to help move some equipment to the lower ranch but he had actually refused to help, saying Rich should look for one of the neighbors who might have time for that.

Is Richard wrong to expect help from his brother? Is Steven? What about Barbara's concerns about the increasing tension, and her worry about where it may lead?



Breaking the Peace

The family dynamic described above is just one example of how peace can be derailed in agricultural families when working so closely together. This seems to be especially true as new ideas come up, differences of opinion are shared, and decisions are made without consulting everyone. What are some of the other issues that can disrupt peace in a family?

It should be no surprise that conflict arises whenever you bring people together. Conflict is a part of life. Learning how to cope with it is a necessary skill. When conflict involves family and the family business, it can escalate to a whole other level, especially in agricultural families. The agriculture community already breeds people to be self-sufficient, driven, and passionate. Bringing individuals with these traits together can, at times, create tension and lead to disruption of the peace.

One of the challenges in family-owned farms or ranches is that there is often little or no separation of family and business. Family members often live on the same land where the business takes place and the success of the operation, as well as the family, are connected to it. Thus, the stress from the business can often run over into family life and vice versa.

Another factor that can add stress and disrupt the peace in a family is uncertainty. The strain uncertainty creates can overflow to influence the future of the business, as well as an individual's future within the business. Agricultural businesses are subject to market fluctuations, changes in the cost of inputs, and competition. These shifting business factors can be challenging



to experience but, even more difficult, is dealing with the uncertainty about an individual's future within the business. *Is dad going to turn over the management of the ranch to me at some point? Who is taking over when dad leaves? Or, what will happen when he is no longer able to run the farm?*

Stress can also result from not being invited to share in making management decisions. This can be particularly difficult when the individual is heavily involved in day-to-day operations with obvious expectations that they will do what it takes to keep the operation going; even what might feel like at any cost.

Restoring the Peace

A breakdown in the peace of a family isn't typically due to just one person's actions. As a result, restoring that peace often takes concerted effort by everyone involved--individuals and the family as a whole. Individuals can take positive steps to relieve stress and begin to restore peace in the family. Rachel Eddins, Councilor for Eddins Counseling Group, offers seven practices everyone can follow:

1. Cultivate a positive view of others

While individuals may feel very strongly about their opinion or point of view, it is important that everyone respect each other and realize that everyone's opinion matters. Work to think positively about other family members. Don't look out for only your own opinions, but be considerate and respectful of the opinions of others as well.

2. Demonstrate patience and mildness

Practice taking a step back when conflict arises, take a deep breath, and look at the situation from all angles. Eddins recommends looking at the problem from: a) your own point of view b) the other person's point of view, and c) the point of view of a third party. For more on this strategy see the Ag Legacy newsletter "*Difficult Conversations: How do we discuss what really matters?*"

3. Never resort to abusive behavior

Verbal or physical abuse is never the correct path. Instead of using your words as daggers, seek ways to sooth and heal your loved one's feelings. Trying to make your point at the expense of another is never productive. Resist the urge to be sarcastic, raise your voice, or make unfounded accusations.

4. Practice sharing and giving

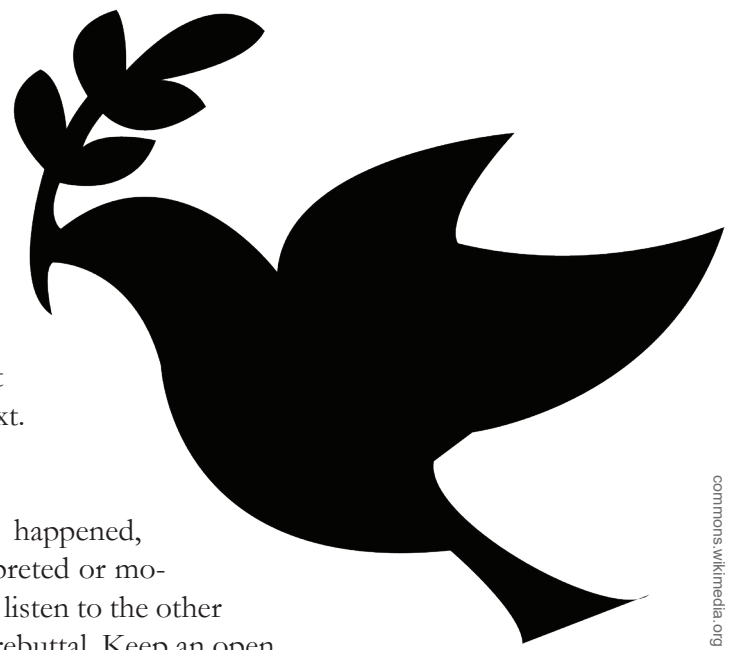
Take time to get to know your family members. What do they like? What makes them happy? Surprise them sometime with a gift or an act of kindness. You may be surprised by what happens next.

5. Listen attentively

Conflict is typically based on what an individual perceives has happened, rarely on what actually happened. Actions can often be misinterpreted or motives misconstrued in the heat of the moment. Take time to really listen to the other person, instead of just hearing them while already planning your rebuttal. Keep an open mind without prejudice.

6. Be ready to apologize

Be willing to apologize and take responsibility for your part in the conflict. Even if you feel you haven't done anything wrong, you can apologize for your negative response. Family peace is more important than pride or victory.



7. Be willing to forgive

Holding back forgiveness can seem like you are reserving some sort of advantage to use the next time conflict arises but, in reality, you are holding back progress. Forgiving someone when they have apologized helps reunite a family. It can restore peace and allow the family to move past the struggle.

Family Responsibilities

Each individual must work to bring peace into their own lives and into their interactions with others. The family can take steps to encourage peace, both in family member relations and within family business relationships. In her article on finding peace in a family-run business, Maria Tanski-Phillips provides tips that can help families address and manage stress, as well as restore peace within the family and the business.

Set boundaries

Setting boundaries can help keep out favoritism, family politics, and nepotism. Develop a clear process for assigning roles and responsibilities that is not based on lineage. Rather, look at each family member's skills, abilities, and interests. Mix up the roles within the family and don't be afraid to give authority to employees outside the family if that is more appropriate.

Address family drama outside the business

Workplace drama is inevitable. Bringing family into the mix can amplify this. The last thing you want to do is address family drama at work. It is important to keep family drama from entering into the workplace. Some strategies to help with drama include:

- Address all issues, both big and small, before they snowball out of control
- Ensure everyone is communicating openly
- Treat every team member equally (family or not)
- Come up with a plan to address contention when things get heated
- Always be on the lookout for problems

Create a succession plan

Think about who should take over when planning business succession. Base this decision on skills, experience, and commitment to the company. It should not be a popularity contest. It is also important to involve all family members and employees



involved in the operation in discussions about the future. The succession plan should address the following:

- Training for teamwork and leadership
- Key players
- Future leaders
- New owners, and stockholders, if applicable
- New CEO, if applicable

The more detail the better. This helps the plan become more transparent to everyone involved. It also allows the individuals to plan for their future as they better understand what their roles and responsibilities will be.

Maintain a work/family balance

Keep a separation between family issues and work issues to preserve peace. This can be difficult when working with family, and even more difficult when working on a family farm or ranch. Not only do the family members work together, they typically live on the operation together and it isn't a 9-5 job!

One approach for maintaining this balance is to plan family time when you spend time together, not as coworkers, but simply as family. Go out to dinner, schedule a family game night, or plan a family vacation. Spending quality time together outside the business helps families maintain the separation, provides time for bonding, and may even repair damaged relationships.

Keeping the peace

Families face many challenges. Bringing family stress into the business will not only amplify the stress, but can also complicate relationships at work among family members. A big source of stress that can disrupt the peace in a family is uncertainty. Taking time to build a plan for succession of ownership and management of the family farm or ranch will allow family members to find peace and understanding about their future. This also allows them to make plans for their own future.

Resources

Eddins, Rachel. 2017. Family Conflicts: 7 Ways to Keep the Peace in Your Home. Eddins Counseling Group. <https://eddingscounseling.com/family-conflicts-keep-peace-home>. Accessed September 30, 2022.

Tanski-Phillips, Maria. 2021. Got Conflict? Here's How to Keep the Peace in a Family-run Business. Patriot Small Business Blog. <https://smallbusiness.patriotsoftware.com/keeping-peace-family-run-business-tips>. Accessed September 30, 2022.



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