



FAMILY

Ranching and Farming With Family Members

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Quick Facts...

In Colorado, 87 percent of all farms and ranches are owned and operated by families.

Intergenerational farms and ranches are unique among businesses in their integration of production and family life.

A serious communication or relationship problem is at the root of many financial problems.

Open communication among both generations works even with the highly stressful issue of land transfer.

“My mom and dad homesteaded the place, and they have trouble letting me handle things the way I think I should. After six years at Colorado State in agronomy, you’d think they’d have some confidence in what I think! They just can’t seem to let go,” said one 35-year-old farmer.

Two-generation agricultural families are defined as an older generation with fathers or mothers actively involved in the operation and a younger generation of adult children and their spouses. Few businesses other than farming or ranching have as much family involvement in day-to-day operations.

In 2000, 87 percent of Colorado’s 30,847 farms and ranches were individually owned. Only 12 percent were in partnerships or corporate farms (Colorado State Fact Sheet, n.d.). Farm, home and family make up a dynamic system with daily opportunities and challenges. Based on conversations with specialists and families, over half of the farm and ranch operations in Colorado have intergenerational conflicts.

The root of many financial problems is a serious communication or relationship problem. For example, a grown son may still be angry at his father for whipping him as a boy. A wife may be unhappy living on the ranch or farm. Sometimes brothers cannot stand each other and have very different approaches to handling the operation.

Often efforts to reach economic goals are blocked by unresolved issues among two or more generations. This is due in part to different ages, life experiences, beliefs, needs and wants. Families can enhance their relationships and trust levels by building skills in communication, goal-setting, decision-making, role negotiation, problem-solving, conflict resolution and strategic planning. Not only can they agree on a shared family vision with shared economic and social goals, but they also can develop a team effort. A team effort can help accomplish a shared family vision that can increase net profitability.

What happens when two or more generations farm or ranch together? Things can go smoothly. However, some families experience misunderstandings, misinterpretations and conflict. For example, an in-law may feel like a low-paid hired hand who cannot risk disagreeing with parental decisions. Or siblings who played well as children no longer see eye-to-eye on the way things should get done. Issues can arise between a sister and brother due to the tradition that allows the boy to make the big decisions.

Many researchers assume that operating a farm is like operating any other business: “Agricultural economists have argued that farms are or should be operated exclusively as businesses in which performance is evaluated by profit returned.” One woman recently said, “If our operation was like a business, we could fire one or two of our family members, but we can’t!” A 15-year Cornell study of how 33 farm families make decisions concludes that while “farms are

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indeed operated as businesses ... because production is closely related to the life cycle of the family, the farm, in organization and management, is remarkable, if not unique, among businesses in developed economies” (5).

Stressors

Farm families face both operational stressors (machinery breakdown, disease outbreak, accidents, government regulations) and farm family stressors (child turning 13, caring for an aging parent). Rising health care costs are an emerging issue for Coloradans. The most frequently occurring stressor of two-generation farm families in Iowa was living with “tight money” (22). For sons- and daughters-in-law, another frequently reported stressor was not being on one’s own. For mothers and fathers, the most frequently reported stressor was taking responsibility for risks and disagreements over spending. A frequently reported stressor for daughters-in-law and mothers was “not being a part of the operation.”

Another study (23) examined the family satisfaction levels of 242 senior generation farmers and 239 junior generation farmers. Weigel and Weigel (1990) write: “... neither generation is happy with the communication in their two-generation farm family. Items such as handling arguments, fair criticism and family problem solving were ranked low by both groups.”

One of the most stressful intergenerational farming issues is the transfer of the family farm from one generation to the next (1, 20, 23).

Coping Strategies

Critical coping strategies for successfully managing the transfer of the family farm are: open communication among family members about the transfer plans; allowing feelings to be expressed and acknowledged; and planning early (1). Ideally, a three-phase transfer process (labor, management, and land) occurs gradually as both generations are ready (3, 16). Frequently, however, one generation is ready to transfer before the other (21, 22). This raises the “issues of power, control, decision making, resource allotment, and family unity [which] can all influence the satisfaction of family members during the transfer process.” Researchers found that “... the families who were able to communicate about needs, desires, and future possibilities were able to ... (make) the smooth transition of the farm operation from the parents to the children over a period of years. Communication, common goals, and limited conflict of loyalties all help preserve the sense of unity in two-generation farm families” (23).

A survey of northeast Iowa farm family members (230 men and 89 women) reported that successful stress managers were aware of their strengths, skills and weaknesses; practiced time management and goal-setting techniques; involved themselves in hobbies and recreation; used their support systems; and practiced a variety of stress-management techniques (relaxation, exercise, problem solving and assertiveness) both when in a stress response and when not (23). One of the best coping strategies for managing intergenerational stressors is open communication.

In a New York State study of 20 farm families, those with low stress levels were found to use an open (rather than closed) communication style; to make decisions democratically (rather than in an authoritarian manner); and to plan ahead for stressors that accompany particular stages in the family life cycle (rather than react day-to-day) (12, 13, 14).

Several studies have focused on effective strategies farm families use to cope with various stressors. In one, major coping mechanisms used by farm couples facing economic hardship were becoming aware of blaming each other; reducing blaming; and shifting negative perceptions of loss to more positive meanings (19).

Another found that the more dairy farm husbands were involved in the home, the more supported wives felt. The authors suggest that “the quality of relationships within the family and the social support provided by them may be a more important component of the stress experience than actual role duties or the relationship between roles” (4).

A third study reported that often-used coping strategies of rural wives and husbands are “reframing” and “seeking spiritual support” (17). In a study of coping strategies used by two-generation farm families to cope with the stress of intergenerational farm transfer, researchers reported individual coping and discussion skills were the strategies used most by all family members, and the next most used coping strategy by daughters-in-law was expression of anger and by fathers and mothers was use of professionals (20). The most frequently reported coping strategy farm family members used to handle the regular challenges of two-generation farm family living was “having faith in God” (22). A study of Kentucky farmers reported that 90 percent relied on faith (8). Other important coping strategies were being flexible, encouraging each other, acceptance, problem analysis, visiting friends, physical activity, outside interests, family meetings, help from professionals, and avoidance of problems (22).

Recommendations

Two-generation farm families should be offered education on “communication skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, decision making ... [and] goal setting” over extended time periods (22). Of particular note is the strong recommendation that farm families who anticipate a transfer of the farm to the next generation plan early for the transfer and maintain open communication throughout the process (1). Family life educators and Cooperative Extension agents are advised “to work with family members to help them identify areas of contention and ... (help them develop) communication skills that will allow them to negotiate satisfying outcomes. This may involve basic skills training including communication, problem solving, and decision making ...” (2).

Practical Strategies

The reason some intergenerational ranching and farming families have trouble reaching their economic goals is due to undeveloped foundational skills. Sometimes a family’s effort to decide on shared financial goals fails. They may be stuck like one woman’s family: “We hash over issues for hours and hours and they never get resolved. We don’t agree on a direction or a plan, so we just go on doing what we did before and stay mad at each other.” Sometimes before the generations can come to a consensus on family financial goals or before they work together to achieve them without sabotage, they need to brush up on their skills in communication, trust-building, problem-solving, negotiation, goal-setting and strategic planning (11, 24).

Some practical strategies intergenerational farming and ranching families can experiment with are as follows:

1. Write down your personal, family, and work goals for three months, six months, and a lifetime. Many people have found it helpful to purchase and use a copy of *Time Management for Busy People* (9).
2. Make time to sit and think. Know what you want and need for your well-being. Practice healthy stress management strategies. Consider asking your Cooperative Extension agent for fact sheet 10.201, *Farming, Ranching: Health Hazard or Opportunity?* (7).
3. Deal well with unfinished business with others. Ask your Cooperative Extension agent for 10.214, *Transitions and Changes: Practical Strategies* (18).

4. 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 negotiate mutually satisfying solutions). Also, check out what the other person heard you say: “Would you tell me what you heard me say?”
5. Ask your Cooperative Extension agent about effective family meetings. Request a copy of 10.249, *Manage Anger Through Family Meetings*. (10)
6. Reflect with your family on when you solved problems well. Think back to when either your family or another family solved a problem. What worked? What didn’t? Make a list of successful strategies.
7. If your family problems are too complex to solve yourselves, seek professional help. Although farming and ranching families may have to drive several miles to a larger city to find qualified professional resources, the help you get may save you much pain and money (11, 15). Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book or ask friends about confidential, effective counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, mental health practitioners, social workers or pastoral counselors.

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