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Farming Together: Developing the Next Generation of Management

Cole Ehmke

University of Wyoming, wheatranger@yahoo.com

Alan Miller

Purdue University, millerwa@purdue.edu



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Farming Together: Developing the Next Generation of Management

Abstract

Farming Together is a long-running workshop at Purdue University that assists farming families in developing a son, daughter, or partner in becoming a future manager in the business. The workshop provides information and work time to develop answers to common questions and begin making decisions together.

Cole Ehmke

University Extension Specialist
University of Wyoming
Laramie, Wyoming
cehmke@uwyo.edu

Alan Miller

Farm Business Management Specialist
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana
Millerwa@purdue.edu

Introduction

The successful addition of future farm managers to a farm is a widely recognized concern. Fetsch (1999) notes that transition planning is one of the riskiest, most stressful, and under-researched issues of critical importance to ranch and farm families. To address this issue, the Farming Together workshop was created in 1980 at Purdue University. At that time, and to this day, it was noted that a lack of communication and joint decision making was prevalent among farms with returning family members.

The need for open communication on a transfer plan has been strongly recommended (Anderson & Rosenblatt, 1985; Fryer & Thorne, 1993; Hedlund & Berkowitz, 1979; Keating, 1996; Rosenblatt, deMik, Anderson, & Johnson, 1985; Russell, Griffin, Flinchbaugh, Martin, & Atilano, 1985; Weigel, Blundall, & Weigel, 1986).

The Farming Together workshop challenges participants to:

- Develop a plan for effective communications,
- Create a shared vision for the future of the business,
- Determine if resources are adequate,
- Define the role of each management team member, and
- Initiate dialogue that will lead to a management succession plan.

Program Overview

Farming Together is an annual 1 1/2-day workshop designed to present practical information on building a successful transition plan and provide participants the opportunity to begin developing plans that will address important issues. It directly addresses the issues faced by agricultural

producers as the next generation of manager joins the operation.

Participants meet on the Purdue University campus the last weekend in January to accommodate farming families who are likely to have a student on campus. Program leadership comes from the Department of Agricultural Economics. Topic sessions are designed to provide practical information followed by time for participants to meaningfully engage family members. Participant evaluations indicate that the work sessions that follow topical presentations are a highly valued element of the workshop.

Audience

The audience of Farming Together is primarily Indiana-based farming families, many with a son or daughter attending Purdue who will be joining the family business on graduation. Participating families often include the entire senior and junior generations. Farming Together typically reaches 20-25 families a year.

Program Features

Pre-Program Preparation

Prior to the Farming Together workshop, participating farms are asked to complete and return the following:

- A Myers-Briggs personality assessment (used to help the members of the management team understand how differences in personality type affect communications),
- Balance sheet and income statement financial information (from which key performance measures are calculated by the planning committee prior to the workshop), and
- A form for soliciting participant's legal questions.

At the workshop, content sections address issues in five primary areas: communication, visioning, resource assessment, management succession, and personnel and legal issues.

Communication

An absolute requirement for successful work relationships is for the participants to communicate well. The introductory session introduces participants to effective communication strategies, recognizing that personality is an important part of personal relations. Over the course of a morning, each participant receives his or her Myers-Briggs report --typically an illuminating event-- and learns communication techniques for use with personality types.

Visioning

Many times people live and work together without having a clear concept of what others expect from their involvement in the business or in what direction others believe the operation should go. To promote communication of these interests, participants are introduced to vision statements and then asked to begin creating one that reflects the shared vision of those involved for the future of the venture. This statement is useful in outlining strategic and personal directions as well as developing goals and objectives for implementing plans.

Assessing Resources

With an understanding of what a desired future operation could be in hand, participants then are asked to consider what resources will be required for the operation to support a new addition and move in the selected direction. Each operation reviews the current state of the business in comparison to financial benchmarks (calculated by instructors using information provided in advance and then circulated at the workshop) and discusses the implications.

Management Succession Issues

To understand both the idea and form of succession plans, presenters directly address the common components as well as common pitfalls. Information is provided on different ways to share ownership and management, and how to intentionally structure the transfer of them as the new manager develops skill.

Personnel and Legal Issues

To help formalize the expected roles of each farming partner, the presenters provide information on writing job descriptions for each position--emphasizing that they should be living documents that evolve as the relationships and skills evolve. Additionally the workshop addresses the legal tools used in owning and transferring assets--an area keen interest.

Workshop Background

Marketing, funding, and evaluation elements for each workshop include the following.

Marketing

Farming Together advertising includes promotion through the Farm Management courses taught at Purdue, brochures directly mailed to potential participants or downloaded by participants from the Agricultural Economics Department's Web site, and brochures distributed through Purdue Extension offices. Media releases summarize key points of the workshop.

Funding

Principal funding is provided by a registration fee. Each farm may participate for an early registration fee of \$80. Purdue University's Department of Agricultural Economics supports Farming Together with time and expertise as well as incidental costs.

Evaluation

The Farming Together workshop is evaluated for its helpfulness/usefulness, relevance, and interest level using a post-workshop evaluation form. Responses consistently indicate that the workshop is highly successful. Also, continuing interaction with participants, in some cases over many years, supports the initial highly complimentary reaction of participants.

Participants strongly support the heavy emphasis throughout the workshop on the crucial role of effective communications, and most find the Myers-Briggs activity a useful tool for facilitating the initial discussion of effective communications. Participant evaluations often specifically mention particular topics addressed during the workshop, which they hadn't thought of prior to attending the workshop, that they now plan to incorporate in their transition planning. Participants also value the opportunity to hear what has worked for other farm families.

Many participants emphasize over and over again the value of having the opportunity to attend the workshop as a means to get the succession planning process started for their farm business. As one participant wrote, "All very good. Sure makes everyone think and question if they want to or can farm together."

Conclusion

An important and unmet need of families intending to farm together is to stimulate conversations on the topics that facilitate farm management development and transition. The Farming Together workshop has consistently provided an opportunity to initiate discussion and provided access to resources for the process of integrating another member into a farm or ranch.

Farm management education programs such as Farming Together increase the likelihood that future farm managers will be successful. This program can be a useful outreach model for other Extension and university programs to increase communication and strengthen family businesses.

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