

## **FENCE POSTS TALKING TO EACH OTHER**

**Sometimes rather simple misunderstandings as well as the stress of daily life on a farm can quite easily damage the personal relationships between family members. Too often the inability to openly share personal feelings and the failure to discuss expectations can ruin any family business operation.**

**This is most often caused by an actual breakdown in communications between individuals, especially during periods of stress (i.e. whether financial, work or even personal) when persons withdraw or hide their emotions from each other.**

**Juggling the current demands of work on the farm, family and personal needs can become quite a challenge to anyone. Persons get so wrapped up in their own individual problems, they fail to communicate effectively with others. The result is that everyone is talking to each other but no one is really listening (i.e. talking to a fence post).**

A frequent complaint by individuals experiencing this breakdown in communication with other family members is that the other person will not discuss or share their personal feelings with me. "I ask a question or propose an idea, but I get no response. Or they answer my question with another question." Too many times we already have the other person tuned out. Daily life distractions (i.e. newspapers, market reports, phone calls, sports on the TV, noise by the children) can entirely disrupt the communication process. One very common mistake in family relations is that we always have or find the time to talk with others (i.e. friends, neighbors, sales person) but never seem to find the time to talk with each other. These same complaints can be heard by farm employees who experience this difficulty in communicating with their boss or manager in a farming operation.

### **Barriers to Effective Farm Family Communication**

How can a farm family actually work together each day but really never communicate with each other? That result is quite easy to accomplish. There are so many barriers that farm families face when trying to communicate with each other.

Some persons are simply reluctant to share their inner feelings and emotions with others. They want to keep their thoughts private and only to themselves. "No one needs to know how I actually feel about this." By sharing these true feelings, I might have to admit I was wrong and made a mistake. To some individuals telling someone "I am sorry" is a sign of personal weakness. Their strategy is to appear being strong by not revealing or sharing their true feelings with others.

Some individuals try to control or dominate the conversation and never give the other family member the chance to talk. That way things always work out as they want. They spend little time listening (i.e. not willing to take the time since they are so busy or wrapped up in their own affairs) to others. They do not want to be bothered by others. They are only concerned with their own needs and self-interests. Who cares about what someone else has to say anyhow?

\*\*\* Presented by Professor Ron Hanson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, at the *2006 Tennessee Young Leaders Conference* at the Double Tree Hotel in Jackson, TN on February 11, 2006.

Unfortunately, in some family and employee relationships there is a definite lack of respect and trust between individuals. Without having a basic trust with others and/or respect for others, it is extremely difficult to talk through problems or conflicting issues in a positive and productive manner. The communication process quickly breaks down.

### **Skills for Listening to the Concerns of Other Family Members**

Listening is the one part of the communication process that is always taken for granted. The assumption is made that since I am talking directly with this other person (i.e. looking right at each other), that individual is certainly listening to every word that I am saying. Most times this is not true. We think we are communicating with our family members and our employees, but no one may actually be listening. The other person may already have me tuned out or already have their mind made up regardless of what I am discussing. Or they are already rehearsing their response to disagree with me while I am still talking. Whenever this happens, the communication process between family members or with employees quickly fails.

In order to improve upon our personal listening skills and better understand the concerns and personal feelings of others, the following list represents some ideas to consider adopting in order to become a better listener during the communication process with others:

1. Do not pass judgement until you have understood what the other person has said.
2. Do not add viewpoints or change what the other person has said.
3. Do not permit your attention to drift away while the other person is still talking.
4. Do not interrupt or change the subject.
5. Do not close your mind.
6. Do not finish for the other person.
7. Do not permit wishful listening.
8. Do not rehearse your response.
9. Do not put the other person off. "We'll talk about it later."
10. Do not rush the other person. "This better be quick. I'm in a hurry."

Improving upon our own listening skills is not an easy task. It takes a definite commitment of time and attention to the other person. That may mean putting down the newspaper or turning off the TV when the other person is trying to talk. Care must be taken to always be sensitive to the feelings of others. Possibly you did not feel it was such a big deal to begin with (i.e. nothing to get upset over), but that other person might have thought it was important and worth discussing. There is a need to understand the circumstances which caused this situation to begin with. Why is this person upset or even angry with me? What caused this to happen?

Even though you disagree or dislike what you are hearing, there still needs to be a basic respect for that

person and what they are telling you. Without mutual respect, there is also a lack of trust. Individuals will not share their feelings or ideas if they feel threatened. If their feelings are valued by another person, they are more willing to openly discuss their ideas and thoughts. This is very important in establishing a good working relationship and trust between family members and especially with farm employees.

Being a good listener takes a lot of effort. But there are several ways to improve upon our listening skills. Try to identify the key points of what the other person is actually sharing. Ask a question or two to clarify or help sort out the real issues involved in the conversation. This shows the other person that you are actually listening and want to understand correctly what they are trying to explain.

Pay attention to changes in voice tones and watch for any nonverbal communication signals. This should warn you that the other person is about to say something that is quite important to them or share with you an information item that you may not be expecting. Do not jump ahead in the conversation but give the other person a chance to say what they want and in the manner they feel the most comfortable.

The most important listening skill to develop is to be understanding as a listener without being judgmental of the other person. Keeping a calm attitude and remaining objective will enhance the communication process with another person even in a stressful situation. Showing that you really care about the other person's feelings and want to help if possible will build a sense of trust with others. Gaining the trust of other family members as well as farm employees will open the doors to better communications in our working relationships.

### **Dealing With Disagreements in a More Positive Manner**

Disagreements in a family or with farm employees are normal and often times inevitable. Disputes within a family farm business operation are sometimes unavoidable. Disagreements are part of life itself but they do not have to ruin relationships with family members or with farm employees. Conflict can be damaging to an individual's self-esteem and their trust of others if the family or the farm's working environment itself is not supportive and understanding of others.

Fairness is the key issue in resolving any conflict situation between individuals. Learning to deal with conflict in a positive manner can actually lead to personal growth as an individual. Always look for win-win situations. Everyone needs to save face. Make a concession or two as a friendly gesture of good will. Resist having the "last word or else" or taking a "final parting shot" after things have been settled. Knowing when to stop talking and just listen to the other person is an effective strategy. Avoid using terms that are conversation killers (i.e. "How dumb can you be?" "Why do you always do that?") that often times will either curtail or even stop the communication process entirely.

**The real trick to improving relationships as well as communications with other family members and with farm employees is learning "how to have your disagreements with another person without being disagreeable".**

## **Strategies for "FIGHTING FAIR" During Personal Disagreement With Family Members and Farm Employees**

Many times, however, individuals will use what are regarded as unfair fighting tactics during a disagreement with another family member or an employee. They know the other person too well and then try to use that to their advantage. This may mean refusing to even admit that the problem even exists or simply pretending that the problem will disappear by itself over time.

Another common tactic is to walk away and/or give the other person the silent treatment. They are not willing to openly discuss the issue or problem at hand. The strategy is make the other person think that this is their problem to work out alone. Others try the “avalanche approach” to working through a disagreement. They store up all their gripes over time and then unload them all at once. The other person is overwhelmed and does not know how to respond to so many problems being thrown at them all at once.

It is quite easy for families to worry more about who to blame rather than finding a solution to the problem at hand. Most of their time is spent fighting or arguing about this issue or disagreement rather than working out a feasible solution or compromise. Too many times families find themselves fighting about the same old issues without ever resolving their real differences that exist which caused the problem to begin with.

Learning to share your feelings without blaming the other person is the first step in working through any disagreement in a positive manner. Keep your discussion focused on the problem at hand (i.e. one problem at a time). Never let one argument lead to another argument. Persons will become even more upset to the point where nothing can be resolved.

**Try avoid using the terms “you always” or “you never” during a disagreement.** Using the word “you” only points the finger of blame at the other person. They will quickly become defensive and never understand what you are trying to explain. Be sure to avoid any name calling or yelling. This only makes matters much worse. Also be honest with each other and stick to the facts of the matter being discussed. This will keep the emotional stress out of the discussion at hand.

**An important point to remember:** Never argue with another person in public. Keep any family arguments or personal disagreements with farm employees private. And above all else, remember to tell other family members as well as farm employees "**I am sorry**" and then show that you mean it. By following these simple practices in handling any disagreement with another family member or an employee, there is a much better opportunity to resolve any existing differences or conflicts in a more positive manner.

### **Focus on Family Strengths in Stressful Times\*\*\***

Families can grow strong even in difficult or stressful times. Families offer a unique strength that can help a person better deal with the stressful changes of life. Families provide the needed supportive role to its members.

No family is or will ever be perfect. The fiber that holds a family together grows strong over time. No

family changes overnight. How families learn to cope with change and stress itself will influence the qualities of their lives. It is possible for a family to improve and gain stronger ties, but this requires a commitment by each farm family member involved.

Family strengths are important to everyone. The family is a personal refuge and caretaker of its members. We begin in families. From our families we can learn who we are and who we might become. Families sustain us in difficult times, share our dreams, and become a part of our pleasures and memories throughout life. **(Adapted from Professor Herb Lindgren, Extension Family Life Specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.)**

## **Keeping a Positive Focus During Periods of Farm Stress**

During extended periods of farm stress (i.e. over-worked, little rest, constant worry, low farm prices, summer drought, financial hardships), it is often the ones that we love the most that are the first to experience our frustrations. Our sense of helplessness in not being able to change the present situation builds up anger that spills out to those we love the most. **Too many times we keep things bottled up inside.** The attitude is "I have to find a way to work this out myself." **This sense of isolation in a family or in a marriage solves nothing.** Not allowing others to help and share in our frustration only makes matters worse. A mental state of depression can actually result.

The current situation in production agriculture is no different. Difficult economic times often force many farm producers to leave agriculture. That cannot be stopped. **But the real tragedy is that many farm family relationships will be destroyed during this process as the agricultural economy struggles through transition and restructuring during these periods of extremely difficult economic times.**

**Farm families are very private.** No one else needs to know about their personal or family problems. Their own personal pride and even foolish stubbornness prevents them from sharing this stress and their inner personal feelings with others who want to understand the situation and offer help. **Knowing that you do not face these problems alone can begin the healing process of a stressful situation. Everyone needs to know that someone else cares and worries about them.**

In any type of farm business arrangement, family relationships are important. It takes a real commitment for family members who farm together to get along with each other. Family members can draw strength from each other and provide the needed support that helps one deal with the stress of the farm operation itself. **Knowing that you do not face a problem alone and that you have the support of others is the binding tie that helps hold families together during times of stress or disagreements.**

## **Gain a Proper Perspective When Dealing With Worry and Stress**

**Worry is like a rocking horse because it gives you something to do but gets you nowhere.** A research study on what individuals usually **"worry about"** revealed the following results:

> **44 percent** of the things that people worried about had already happened and nothing could be done to change what had happened in the past.

> **26 percent** of the things that people worried would never happen to begin with.

> **22 percent** of the things that people worried about cannot be changed (i.e. If it happens, it just happens. There is nothing to be done to change it.)

> **Only 8 percent** of the things that people worried about could actually be changed (i.e. they actually had some control over the situation and could do something).

**In any stressful situation, keeping a sense of humor can make a positive difference in any relationship. Never lose the ability to smile and just enjoy life itself. Sharing that positive focus with other family members will build a stronger and more trusting relationship that will endure the stress and conflict that families often face in any situation when working together.**

### **Focus on a "Team Effort" Approach to Family Farming**

**The single most important word of advice to share with family members farming together is to remember that any successful family farming operation requires a team effort approach by each individual family member involved.**

Each family member must have the same goal and desire to make that farming operation work as a family unit. This certainly requires a little "give and take" by each family member. The willingness to openly discuss individual feelings, needs, and expectations with each other is critical to the overall success of any family unit. There must be underlying commitment to get along and work together as a family. Having mutual respect for each other as a family member as well as the willingness to listen and understand the feelings of others is needed to achieve this team effort approach to family farming.

**The most important aspect of this team effort approach is that each individual family member feels important and a part of the family farming operation. No matter how large or even how small the actual contribution to the farming operation itself by each family member, each person needs to feel important and included within the family farming unit. Each individual family member must be given the opportunity for a degree of responsibility in the farm business and a chance to gain recognition for their efforts which contribute to the overall success of the farming operation.**

Relations in any family operation suffer when one discovers that decisions are being made by others that affect their happiness and well-being, and they are not allowed to be a part of or have a voice in those decisions. Suspicions and mistrust among family members quickly surface when this happens. This lack of trust breaks down communications between family members. Individuals withdraw and become reluctant to share their inner most personal feelings with others. Once this trust between family members is destroyed, open and honest communications cease to occur. Misunderstandings quickly lead to conflicts among these family members farming together. A family farming operation that ends up being dissolved is often the result of the family trouble and personal conflicts between family members that occurs when they are not able to get along and work together.

**Building a feeling of family loyalty and pride is important. This common bond of being a**

**family working together to achieve the same goals provides the inner strength for a family to face the stress and daily pressures of the farming operation itself. Remembering that the family itself is a higher priority than the farming operation is a value that each family member needs to understand and adhere to in their actions.**

## **Sharing Appreciation With Other Family Members and Farm Employees**

Many times in a farming operation, the efforts and contributions of individual family members as well as farm employees are quite easily taken for granted. Too often the hectic pace, the burdensome workload, and the numerous stresses of the farm business prevent individuals from expressing their actual feelings and need for each other. All too often individuals involved in a family farming operation (or even in a farm marriage) have the definite feeling of being "taken for granted" by others.

**It is not that these words of appreciation are not meant, but rather that they are often never expressed or shared between family members farming together or with employees. Yet even the simplest expressions "I love you," "I need you," or "I appreciate you" are often left unsaid between these family members and with employees. Sadly enough, these words are sometimes said too late and the other person is no longer there to hear them.**

A son or daughter farming with dad (or an employee) often feels that no matter how hard I try or how many hours I work, I never hear a word of appreciation or praise for what I have done well. But if I ever mess up or make a mistake, I will never hear the end of it. It is rather easy for one in this type of situation to become frustrated and even discouraged to the point of no longer trying to do their best.

Even farm marriages can illustrate the hurt from the lack of appreciation between spouses. A farm wife once shared "If my husband just told me that he loved me and cared about me as much as his new tractor, I would have stayed on that farm and found a way to have saved my marriage." Another wife wrote that "the only thing that my husband and I share together is our mailing address, and now I am going to change that." **It is extremely easy to get so wrapped up in the working demands of the farming operation that we often forget or even ignore the needs and personal feelings of those that we love and appreciate the most in our lives (i.e. family and employees).**

With all the pressures and long working hours of farming, it is all too easy to take out this stress on those that we work with on a daily basis (i.e. our family members and employees). I have often said that the best way to test the strength of a farm marriage is to let a husband and wife sort livestock together on a hot summer day. Or the reaction when someone brings home the wrong combine repair part. Or pulling a tractor out of the knee deep mud in the middle of a wet grain field. Each of these situations can often test the limits of any farm marriage.

## **Summary**

**It takes a real effort and commitment to express and share personal feelings with each other, especially our family and our farm employees. Everyone needs to know that someone else cares about me and worries about me. Sharing a few simple words of appreciation and love can make a dramatic difference in any farm family relationship. This will have a very positive impact on the farm's employees who now know that their efforts are recognized and appreciated as well.** This will actually build a commitment by these employees to the farm business operation and enhance their motivation to continue their efforts in a productive and dependable manner.

Too many times family members just assume that they'll have more time to spend and share together next year. Or next time they'll express their personal feelings for that other person. But many families never get a second chance.

**Initiating a more determined effort to spend more personal time together and to better communicate and share feelings with each other can be a positive step in building stronger and closer relationships between family members and with farm employees in any farming operation.** This is especially important for the well being of each family member as well as each farm employee during times of farm stress and financial hardships.