Growing the People in Your Family Farming Operation

by Bruce Erickson

The end-of-the-year holiday period is often a time for re-assessment for farm families and their associated enterprises—most have last year’s crops in the bin, and planning is underway for next year. It is a good time to think about some of the things you maybe can’t get to during the growing season with the daily pressures of growing crops. Things such as taking a more than superficial look at the roles and relationships of your fellow family members and employees that keep your business running.

“Hard communication, the practice of conveying facts and information, is usually easier for most people,” says Sarah Fogleman, Kansas State University Research and Extension. “On the other hand soft communication, conveying feelings and emotions, can be extremely difficult, especially for some individuals.”

Fogleman offers some help when thinking about the human side of farming---the multiple roles of individuals, delegating management responsibility, and accepting the changes that will inevitably accompany growth:

Individuals Play Multiple Roles

Sometimes business and workforce growth can come via a growth in our families—younger generations join the business, brothers or sisters come back to the farm. One of the major principles people within a family workforce should understand is that there are multiple roles these individuals must play. At minimum, there are three “hats” a person may have to wear from time to time:

- The “Business” role will be the job the person performs within the scope of the operation (manager, accountant, mechanic).
- The “Family” role will be the job that person provides to the family (wife, father, daughter).
- And finally it’s important to remember that everyone has the right to a “Personal” role as well—those things that may not benefit the business or the family and yet help to keep us all sane (basketball fan, deer hunter, pianist).

In this and many other respects, it is important for family businesses to model their non-family counterparts.

Delegate Management Responsibilities as Your Business Grows

Next it is vital that the member of the family workforce not only appreciate the different roles each other play, but also the way those roles relate to each other. This is particularly important when family members will be working with non-family employees. It’s important that the management team take stock of who should be responsible for which roles in the operation. Managers who “grow” their teams must learn to delegate. Begin by asking what you need to do, then what you want to do? What are the areas that do not compliment your strengths?

In recent years job descriptions have become very popular as valuable instruments of employee management. They give potential and current employees an accurate picture of what role they are expected to play in the team. From employee recruitment and selection to performance evaluation and
feedback, managers are using job descriptions to ensure that the business and the employee have the same perceptions of the position.

It is important to note that as your team grows, job descriptions may very well change. An individual’s job description should change and evolve with the business, position, and employee. It can be as detailed or general, as need be, as long as it conveys the requirements an employee will have to meet to be successful in the position.

**Accept that Growth Will Result in Change**

“The best employee we ever had just left and we couldn’t be happier about it.” That’s not likely a statement you hear every day, but before you assume that those people were crazy, think about the context. The couple in question managed a ranch that had very little room for growth for the employee in question. They had given him all the authority and responsibility they could and he’d thrived under those circumstances, but there was only so much authority and responsibility to give. So instead of stifling their employee, they helped him secure a position as a manager for an absentee landowner who would allow him to manage an entire operation.

One of the threats of truly empowering your people is that sometimes your people will outgrow their current positions. This isn’t a bad thing. When possible, move those people up within your organization. But in those sad cases where that isn’t an option, help that person to move on and then start to work training and empowering his or her replacement. What a wonderful problem to have.

**For More Information**

To contact Sarah Fogleman, or see some of her human resources articles, follow this link: [http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/pr_hrag/HR%20Articles.htm](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/pr_hrag/HR%20Articles.htm)

**Farming Together Workshop—January 26-27, 2007**

If you are thinking about bringing a family member into a farming operation, the Purdue Farming Together Workshop may be of interest to you: [http://www.agecon.purdue.edu/extension/programs/farm_together.asp](http://www.agecon.purdue.edu/extension/programs/farm_together.asp)