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Families who live and farm together have challenges other families don't face. While this provides an opportunity to build closeness, it also creates stress and conflict. In order to balance the needs of the "farm family" with the needs of the "family farm," it is vital to develop good communication and decision-making. John Ward, Professor of Family Enterprises at Northwestern University, concludes that shared decision-making and effective communication are keys to healthy families. Family business meetings help to achieve these goals. A few tips on managing meetings are listed below.

1. **Choose a meeting facilitator.** Begin with someone, either outside or within the family, who naturally has the respect of the family. Later this role can be rotated among family members to broaden the leadership. The facilitator makes sure discussions stay on topic, the meeting keeps flowing, everyone gets to participate and individuals listen to each other. This person helps the family separate business from family issues and problem solving from making decisions.

The facilitator must help the group constructively resolve conflicts. Participants must be reminded to speak using I-messages. Past hurts and blame need to be reframed to what individuals want from each other now and in the future. If emotions become too intense, anyone can call for a break so that anger can deescalate allowing everyone to come together to focus on the problem rather than a "problem person."

2. **Set an agenda.** The purpose of family meetings is to improve communication and understanding about the farm business. These meetings also can develop the values and policies that will guide the business. Family meetings need to create a safe environment to have conversations about the crucial issues. Some of these issues are listed below in examples 1 and 2. Meetings can also organize activities to share family news, family history, family memories, and enhance relational skills. Set realistic time allotments with each agenda item. Make sure everyone gets the agenda in advance so they can adequately prepare for the meeting.
3. **Invite the right people.** Depending on the agenda of the meeting, invite family members who are old enough to participate, in-laws and family members who have a stake in the business. Sometimes it helps to have an outside facilitator, a business advisor or key employees.
4. **Plan family retreats.** Retreats should balance discussion about the farm with activities that build relationships. Include fun activities such as games, plays, tournaments, talent shows, exercise, music, recognition of achievements, family rituals, and food. Family retreats should happen away from the distractions of the farm.

5. **Set ground rules.** These help maintain healthy interactions. Some examples are suggested below.
 - Be on time and come prepared.
 - Listen to understand and then speak to be understood.
 - All relevant information should be shared openly with each other.
 - Accept and support group decisions.
 - Issues should not be shared beyond the family except by common agreement.
6. **Keep a record.** Delegate someone to record important decisions and discussions. This documentation should be filed so that your family remembers what was decided and why.
7. **Organize the next meeting.** Ask for suggested discussion topics for the next family meeting. Set a date, time and place. Rotate meeting roles and responsibilities among family members to build leadership and teamwork. In example 3 below, a worksheet can help you plan and record your family meetings.

Example 1: Questions to Frame the Agenda for Farm Family Business Meetings

Purpose, Values & History

- What do we want from life, the farm experience and individual careers?
- In what kind of environment do we want to work?
- What do I value? What does the family value?

Family Harmony

- How do we deal with conflicts between generations and among siblings?
- How do we teach in-laws and the next generation about the farm business and family traditions?
- How do we make family decisions?

Business Participation

- Does the family want to create an opportunity for the children to farm?
- Do we encourage children to get an education and work experience off the farm before joining the business as an adult?
- What roles for in-laws are most important within the farm business?

Compensation and Ownership

- How do we evaluate and pay family members?
- Who participates in the growth of the farm business?

Succession

- Will there be enough income from the farm business to provide for an adequate level of living for both generations – those working on the farm and those who are retired from the farm?
- In the division of the estate, will each child get an equal share of the farm or what is due to him or her?
- What non-farm interests will keep the parents fulfilled during retirement?
- What happens if a family member doesn't fit within the farm business?

Responsibility

- What responsibilities does one family member have to the other?
- What if there is a divorce?
- How much financial information do we share and with whom?
- What responsibility do we have to the community?

Business Strategy

- What are the resources of the family and how can we put them to work?
- What skills do we need to develop to build a stronger family farm business?
- Do we have the right people in the right business roles? Are the strengths of each individual used in the best way? Are individual weaknesses compensated by someone else's strengths within our farm management team?

Example 2: Common Issues Among Different Family Members in A Farm Business

Fathers

- Who will make the decisions?
- What are the job descriptions?
- What about vacation?
- How do we solve problems?
- How do we keep people informed?

Adult Farm Children

- Where do I fit in the business?
- Discussing my own goals and how they fit in with the goals of others?
- When do I get time off?
- Time to air what's bothering me.
- Time to dream out loud.
- Talk that separates the family from the farm.
- Discuss why we are having a problem.
- Inventory personal property.
- Where do all the kids fit into the family farm picture?
- Designate responsibilities.
- Discuss compensation.

Mothers

- Finances.
- Family and individual needs.
- Who is responsible for what?
- Short- and long-term goals.
- Individual feelings.
- Vacations.
- Family health.
- Transferring the farm to the younger generation.
- Selecting legal advice.
- New ideas.

Spouses of Adult Children

- What direction is the farm going?
- Who all wants to be involved?
- What are the feelings toward the farm and other family members?
- Where do I fit in?
- What are my rights?
- I want to learn – please teach me.
- Can I influence decisions?
- Making time to be with my spouse.
- When will the transition occur?
- Where will we live?
- What will the financial arrangements be?

These are insights gathered from farm family transition conferences as families talked about their family meetings. These issues can help frame the agenda for your family business meetings.

Example 3: Family Meeting Planning Worksheet

What do you want to discuss?

- Farm business issues Family issues Both

What's on your agenda?

| Agenda Item | Who will present? | Time allotted? |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------|
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Who should be involved?

When are you going to meet?

Where?

- Kitchen table Restaurant Office In the car In the field
 Other (week end retreat) _____

Who should facilitate the next meeting?

What were the noteworthy meeting decisions?

| Issue | Decision | Who? | When? |
|-------|----------|------|-------|
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Evaluation

| What worked? | What didn't work? |
|--------------|-------------------|
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Credits

The following authors and publications provided valuable information and insights in the development of this management guide.

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