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FENCE POSTS TALKING TO EACH OTHER

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Sometimes rather simple misunderstandings as well as the stress of daily life 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 relationship. This is most often caused by an actual breakdown in communications between family members, especially during periods of stress (i.e. whether financial, work or even personal) when individuals withdraw or hide their emotions from each other. Juggling the current demands of ranch work, family and personal needs can become quite a challenge to anyone. Persons get so wrapped up in their own 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).

Communications Between Ranch Family Members

The three most frequent complaints:

1. "He/she won't discuss his/her feelings with me."
2. "He/she tunes me out."
3. "He/she has time to talk with everyone but me."

Barriers to Communications Between Family Members

1. Reluctant to share personal feelings with others.
2. Afraid to admit a mistake to someone.
3. Not willing to take the time to listen to others.
4. Too much talking - not enough listening (i.e. controls the conversation).
5. Hard to effectively communicate when someone is always angry.
6. Don't want to be bothered by others.
7. Lack of trust with others.
8. Lack of respect for others.
9. Concerned with only their own needs and self-interests.
10. Not interested in what someone else has to say anyhow.
11. Lack of self-confidence and/or self-esteem by someone.

Ten Skills for Good Listening Between Ranch Family Members

1. Do not pass judgement until you have understood what the other person has actually 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 to you.

4. Do not interrupt the other person 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."

Steps for Improving Your Personal Listening Skills

1. Identity the central theme or key points of the message being shared.
2. Ask questions to clarify or help sort out the real issues involved.
3. Pay attention to changes in voice tone or pauses.
4. Watch for any nonverbal communication signals.
5. Block out your own biases/prejudices while listening.
6. Don't jump ahead in the conversation. Let the other person finish.
7. Try to be understanding without being judgmental.
8. Keep a calm and objective attitude as a listener.
9. Show that you actually care and really want to help.

Developing Good Listening Skills Requires

1. A commitment of time and attention to the other person.
2. Being sensitive to the feelings of others.
3. Clearly understanding the situation or circumstances involved.
4. Having respect for the opinions of others.

Unfair Fighting Tactics Often Used During a Disagreement

1. Refuse to admit that a "problem" even exists.
2. Walk away or give the silent treatment.
3. Store up all your gripes and then unload them all at once.
4. Worry more about who to blame rather than finding a solution to the problem at hand. Time is spent fighting rather than working out a solution.
5. Attack the other person when there is no chance for rebuttal.
6. Point out the other person's insecurities. (i.e. If you really cared about me.)
7. Say that friends/relatives already agree with you.
8. Keep fighting about the same old problems.

Strategies for "Fighting Fair" During a Disagreement

1. Learn to share your feelings without blaming someone.
2. Don't expand the fight beyond the problem at hand.
3. Avoid saying "you always" or "you never" when responding.
4. Try to use "I words" rather than "you words" in the conversation.

5. Stop bringing up the "same old problems" during a disagreement.
6. No personal name calling or yelling at someone.
7. Be honest. Tell the truth. Stick to the facts of the situation.
8. Never argue with someone in public. Keep arguments private.
9. Remember to tell others "I'm sorry."

Dealing with Ranch Family Disagreements in a Positive Manner During Times of Stress

Family disagreements are normal and often times inevitable. Disputes within a family are sometimes unavoidable. Disagreements are part of life itself but they do not have to ruin relationships within a family. Conflict can be damaging to an individuals's self-esteem and their trust of others if the family environment itself is not supportive and understanding. Learning how to have disagreements within any family relationship without being disagreeable with each other is the "real secret" to the long term success of any family business operation from one generation to the next.

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 pot shot" after things have been settled. Knowing when to stop talking and just listen to the other person is an effective strategy.

Avoid using those standard conversation killers (i.e. "How dumb can you be?" "Why do you always do that?" "I know exactly what you are thinking.") that often times will either curtail or even stop the communication process entirely.

Family relationships in any type of business arrangement are important. It takes a real commitment for family members who ranch 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 ranch 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 family together during times of stress or family disagreements.

Keeping a sense of humor in any stressful situation can make a positive difference in a relationship. Never lose the ability to smile and 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 conflicts that families often face in any situation when working together.

Ideas for Implementing Ranch Family Business Meetings

1. Set a specific date (i.e. first Monday morning of each month) so that family business meetings are held on a regular basis throughout the entire year.
2. The meeting place should be on neutral or friendly territory if possible.
3. Establish an agenda for each meeting so that the meeting itself has direction and a special

purpose to achieve. Identity various reports (i.e. marketing, financial, machinery purchase) to be presented during the meeting. Provide a time during each meeting for open discussion of ideas and suggestions to be shared with others.

4. Establish any necessary ground rules to be followed during these family business meetings. (i.e. Who chairs each meeting session? How are ideas to be agreed upon (voted on)? How will any ranch business disagreements be resolved by the family?)
5. Conduct each ranch family meeting on a business-like basis. Develop attitude of professionalism among family members. Use proper business meeting etiquette.
6. Keep minutes (records) of all major business decisions discussed and agreed upon. This will help to clear up any potential misunderstandings that might develop later.
7. Set aside one meeting date a year to discuss and establish both family and ranch business goals for the next year ahead. Review goals from the previous year that were discussed. Both ranch business and family priorities can be identified by the ranch family members. Creates a vision for working together to achieve a common goal(s) by the ranch family.
8. Remember that holding family ranch business meetings on a regular basis (1) improve family communications, (2) reinforces the feeling that the family ranch is a team effort among all family members, (3) eliminates any surprises among family members, (4) allows everyone in the family to be involved and better informed, and (5) keeps "personal or family biases" out of the actual business management of the ranching operation itself.

Goals Have to Be SMART

S specific

M measurable

A agreed upon

R realistic

T timed

Setting Goals for a Ranch Family

1. Family and personal goals.
   a. Short term.
   b. Long term.
2. Ranch business goals.
   a. Short term.

b. Long term.

How to PERKK up Family Ranching Relationships

Participation

Environment

Recognition

Knowledge

Kindness

Coping Strategies for Families Ranching Together**

1. Seek solutions to problems and allow family members to openly express their feelings.
2. Try to reduce any misunderstandings and frustrations between family members by developing a sense of trust and communication between each family member.
3. Encourage family members to take an interest in what each person does and contributes to the ranch business.
4. Allow each family member to be independent and to grow in their own abilities and self-esteem.
5. Achieve a personal balance between work on the ranch and family.
6. Share responsibility for decisions that affect the entire family or ranching operation.
7. Maintain flexibility in who does what in the ranch business. Anticipate changes that will require the family to adapt.

Truths of Family Relationships to Remember**

1. Most family relationships contain a hidden reservoir of HOPE. Even the most destructive conflicts started out with good intentions.
2. One "zinger" alone will erase many acts of kindness. It only takes one put-down to do the damage. Be careful of negative behavior patterns between family members.
3. It is often not the actual differences between individuals that cause problems but how these differences are actually handled when they arise. Individuals often use different strategies or tactics in order to win an argument at almost any personal cost. The final result destroys the individual trust with others.
4. Getting angry is normal. It is like any other feeling. There is nothing wrong with being upset. Learning how to express your anger in a positive manner can make all the difference in a relationship.

** Adapted from Professor Herb Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Expressing Appreciation Among Family Members Ranching Together

Many times in a family ranching operation, the efforts and contributions of individual family members are quite easily taken for granted. Too often the hectic pace, the burdensome workload, and the numerous stresses of the ranch business prevent family members from expressing their actual feelings and need for each other. All too often individuals involved in a family ranching operation (or even in a ranch 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 ranching together. Yet even the simplest expressions, "I love you," "I need you," or "I appreciate you" are often left unsaid between these family members. Sadly enough, these words are sometimes said too late and the other person is no longer there to hear them.

A son or daughter ranching with dad 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. Some ranch 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 ranching operation itself, that we often forget or ignore the needs and personal feelings of those that we love the most in our lives.

It takes a real effort and commitment to express and share personal feelings between family members farming together. Everyone needs to know that someone else cares about you and worries about you. Sharing a few simple words of appreciation and love can make a dramatic difference in any ranch family relationship.

With all the pressures and long working hours of ranching itself, it is all too easy to take out this stress on those that we work with on a daily basis. It has been said that the best way to test the strength of a ranch 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 during harvest or pulling a tractor out of the mud in the middle of a wet field. These situations can often test the limits of a farm or ranch marriage.

The current situation in production agriculture is no different. During extended periods of ranch stress (i.e. low market prices, 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 situations 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 farm price situation will force many producers to leave agriculture. That cannot be stopped. But the real tragedy is that many farm and ranch family relationships will be destroyed during this process as the agricultural economy struggles through this transition and restructuring during these extremely difficult economic times.

It takes a real effort and commitment by each family member to openly express and share their feelings with each other. 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. Ranch 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. 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 family relationships in any family ranching operation.