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GOING HOME TO THE FAMILY RANCH

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Introduction

Going home to the family ranch is a multi-faceted decision to be made following careful analysis of the whole picture. It is important to identify all the players, choose the right timing, define individual roles, and measure what is most valuable. Combined with these factors is the need to establish partnerships with unlikely partners. The plague of urban sprawl threatening every ag enterprise in the nation makes it continually important that we in the beef industry establish a positive relationship with those not associated with ag. The information that follows is a combination of personal history and observation.

Consider All the Players

First let's look closely at family. Family....few other industries' roots go as deeply as the families who represent the beef industry. Not many can say they are the son or daughter of the man who shook the hand of the man who settled the ground. I am proud to be that person you meet when you come to San Isabel Ranch (SIR). It is rare in today's fast paced, convenience oriented society for a person to know the true depth of his/her heritage. Equally unusual is the chance to live on the very soil originally settled by family. Thanks to those before me, I have the chance to continue that tradition. SIR was homesteaded in 1872; even then the importance of building strong relationships with family and community was a priority for my great grandfather. He established trade relations with the Ute Indians and the silver miners to whom he sold hay. Each generation of our family has leaned on his philosophy of positive leadership; open, honest communication coupled with a tough business, and work ethic.

The partnerships that are cultivated will make the difference for any family business. When looking to include children into the daily activities of the ranch you must consider all the people involved. For example, you might be the parent wanting to ask a son or daughter to come home; the son or daughter wanting to return; or the employee who is not related to the family, but working for the brand. Each has a very different perception of the situation and differing expectations. Many children of ranch families expect to either return to the ranch or never leave it.

In my opinion, one of the greatest gifts a parent can give to their child is independence. For over 10 years I was told the ranch was not big enough to support my coming home. As a parent and the owner of the business it is not only financial stability that should dictate when a son or daughter returns. The encouragement to go other directions after high school and college was quite possibly the best thing my parents could have done for me, and for the ranch. There are so many things you can learn and bring back to an outfit if you leave it for a while. For

parents to push their child out of the nest, knowing that is the only place they want to be cannot be easy. For that I say thank you to my parents and to the many others who have done that favor to their children.

The fact that most people carry with them a history of expectations, assumptions and emotions can make returning home both challenging and rewarding. The son or daughter that returns home will discover the responsibilities have changed from when he or she left. Unlike the childhood years I spent cowboying for my Father, I came home in a very different role this time. There is a great deal more at stake when you leave a career and put everything on the line for a place. I was no longer just a daughter and a hired-hand to the ranch...but I am a daughter, hired-hand, wife and business partner.

Typical of anyone in my shoes, I wanted change to happen too fast. I assumed I know what type of relationship Father had with the previous employees of the ranch. I was certain he had spent each early morning planning the day's tasks. When we returned home I felt it necessary to be in the office each morning to do that daily planning with him. Consequently, I frustrated both my Father and my husband, Steve. I learned that the early morning planning sessions that I had remembered from the past were actually a time of building a working relationship with the employees. A relatively small amount of time was spent discussing grazing rotations, cow work, irrigating, machinery, etc., the rest of the time was spent sharing memories, lessons learned from past experiences, and visions for the future. Upon realizing this, I stopped trying to force cohesiveness and a management style that only can occur with time and mutual respect.

Giving lip service to the challenges that husbands and wives working together will face can rarely prepare two people for the communication challenges that will be experienced. The lines of communication seem more easily crossed when family is involved. Expecting too much from one another is a common problem. Typically, we tend to expect more and have less tolerance for mistakes when the person working at your side is family. As an employer it is important that you let your employees, son, or daughter, know that you believe in them. I realize how fortunate we are to work for two individuals who do just that. We are allowed to plan each day as we see most effective. Father encourages us to determine the day's activities and plan accordingly. Initially, I wanted us to take time each day to clarify the day's plan. What I realized was this is what I needed, not what the ranch or those working with me needed. My parents guide us in daily planning, and trust us to do our job. Father continues to make the final decision, but includes our input and ideas in that decision.

Family members need to also realize that the spouse probably has one of the tougher roads to travel. Even if not an employee for the ranch, the spillover nature of ranching can often find the spouse lending a helping hand. Remember that this is volunteer help. A delicate situation can arise if the spouse feels he or she is being taken advantage of. Regardless if the employee is family to the ranch, the spouse's happiness can make a difference between long-term and short-term commitment.

As the daughter coming home I realized that my parents tend to need as much reassurance

as to their role as I did. Conflict can arise when the son or daughter returns simply because of unclear expectations. It might be that he or she expects to assume full responsibility of the ranch. If that is the case, the parent may or may not be prepared to let go of the reins at the time. It is important to make clear everyone's expectations and desired level of participation.

Realizing the personality differences of everyone involved will make communicating that much easier. Some people need to talk out every detail and implement a daily plan. Some need their own space and want to work individually on most tasks. Each of us tends to assume a leadership role at one time or another. Because of this, disagreements are bound to happen. Don't let them be a breeding ground for resentment and lack of respect. Criticism that is not presented constructively can be torturous. While the message might be right, knowing the personalities and adjusting the delivery of that message makes all the difference. In my opinion, a disagreement just means that people care. Everyone has different personalities, interests and strengths that surface as you work together, and will be sharpened over time. The key is to understand your own personality and be willing to blend with your family and employees into a positive, functional team. Certainly, identifying the roles and responsibilities at the start could prevent frustration. When the chain of command is established initially it is bound to change with time and a better understanding of each other. A clear understanding of the mission, and long-term objectives, of the ranch can serve as the flour and water necessary to make binding glue for a working relationship.

Finances

When you make the decision to return home it is important that you determine how involved in the finances you need to be. Then, measure the willingness of everyone involved to discuss that information. Again, it comes down to time and patience. Start immediately, but start slow. Before you make the decision to come home sit down and discuss the current financial state of the ranch, what the retirement and estate plan is, and what the projected time line might be for management changes to occur. Be prepared to ask the hard questions first. Take a look at the financial position of the ranch before you return home. The past history of the ranch will help you understand how it got where it is today.

I know it has been a difficult adjustment for my 76 year old Father to share the finances of the ranch with his daughter...a son would be difficult enough, but for Charlie Kettle's son this has been a large and uncomfortable step.

I appreciate his willingness to open the books and as a family we work through them. Steve and I realize that we do not have to be part of every financial decision. We are included in discussions that impact the long-term viability of the ranch and willing to let the day to day finances be looked after by my parents.

What Is Valuable

It has been said that as a society, we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy less. We have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways but narrower viewpoints;

more conveniences, but less time; we laugh too little and have learned to make a living, but not a life.

No matter if you are the spouse, parent, son-in-law, hired hand, son or daughter, never lose sight of why you chose to work on a family ranch. Taking a frequent look at the big picture and what is truly valuable to you as an individual will make the daily frustrations seem minor. As someone who chose to return home I am lucky to be living exactly where my dream began; have been given the chance to make it come true, and the blessing to share it with my parents and my husband. You have to leave your personal baggage at the door when at a family ranch. Rather than getting bogged down with what you think should have happened in the past you have to look at what is possible for the future. Abraham Lincoln said once, "The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time." You can improve your odds of continuing a family tradition in the beef industry by making the most of each day we are given.

When few in this industry function in the "black" year in and year out, you have to evaluate why you are still holding on. There is obviously better paying, fewer hours required and less physically demanding jobs. For me, like many others, there is nothing else I want to do. Knowing that requires that you look at the big picture, roll up your sleeves and shape the future you envision.

Building New Relationships for the Future

The demands on the land and people who represent agriculture are ever changing. As recently as 25 years ago, producers and consumers could have never imagined the competition for open space compounded by the increased consumption of goods and services being produced with shrinking resources. Company mergers happen nearly every day leaving little competitive opportunity for the smaller family business.

When we returned home we realized that, like many places around the nation, much of the land in the county had been taken out of production agriculture and put into subdivisions and housing. Custer County suffers from the same ailment as most "Gateway Communities" in the West - beautiful scenery and close proximity to major metropolitan areas. Specifically, the county has lost over 100,000 acres out of agriculture and into some type of development. Without a practice movement, that net loss of available land will continue giving agriculture a dim future. It is easy to resent the influx of new people and the sprawl of housing on what was once great grazing land.

So how does a 127-year-old ranch survive the next hundred years? By doing just what my great grandfather did. Establish relationships with those not associated with agriculture. Remember that you can't shake hands with a clenched fist and you can't benefit from new ideas with a closed mind. The influx of new people brings new ideas and expertise. There is an apparent romance for many about what the American Cowboy still represents. The culture, heritage, tradition, and independence typically associated with ranching produces a certain loyalty by those not directly connected to the industry. Those are the people who want to establish relationships with the ranching community; they want to experience the life - if only for

a moment. That desire to be a part of ranching opens the door to new and unexpected partnerships.

Becoming involved in community and industry activities has tremendous benefits for the ranch, but you cannot get involved unless someone is willing to stay home and keep things going. Everyone must find a balance so that one or two people aren't gone the majority of the time. Planning ahead so that everyone has the opportunity to get away from the ranch at one time or another will keep ideas fresh and motivation high. When planning, don't overlook the need to set aside time for your relationship as a couple, as a family, that is separate from the ranch. Many times a family get-together turns into continual discussions of grazing, breeding programs, nutrition, fencing, etc. It takes effort to separate the business from your personal life in any job. Don't let being together 24/7 eliminate the need to make time for each other. There is a reason you moved home, a reason you wanted your son or daughter to come home with his or her family. Don't lose sight of what is really important.

Look in the Mirror

One closing thought. You must look in the mirror and really know who is looking back before you can be part of a team. Define the role you want to play in a family ranch and determine how that role fits with co-workers, with family. Couple this with aggressive desire to make it work and the tradition will continue.