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Kathy Bosch

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Our Relationship.... And Managing the Farm/Business

by Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialist, Family Life Education

When couples manage or own a farm, ranch or other business, they face many challenges. Often these challenges or obstacles are not anticipated. A couple who discusses their situation before committing to the relationship, marriage and work partnership will likely succeed in having a strong relationship. However, all too often couples “fall in love” and end up falling into a situation that proves difficult. Premarital counseling may help couples who anticipate working together in a business. Understandably, the complexities of working together and running a business are not always known. This is especially true for younger couples with little or no experience. However, gaining insight into what issues may cause problems in the relationship and business is a positive step in preventing potential conflict and in strengthening the relationship.

Factors to Consider

When living and working together, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is there trust, respect and communication?
- Are we honest with each other?
- Do I understand what the business involves?
- What is the time and money investment?
- What might be some other costs of the business?
- How do I want to be involved?
- What are the expectations for my involvement?
- How will other family members be involved?
- Is there enough profit for my family to live on?
- What are the needs and goals of the business in the near future, next year, and in five years?
- Have work roles and expectations been clarified?
- Will I make decisions or have a voice in decisions?
- How will decisions be made?
- How will conflict be resolved?

Do I understand what the family needs related to:

- Money-income
- Housing
- Housework, home maintenance
- Sexual satisfaction between partners

- Issues involving kids
- Work (farm and off-farm)
- Planning for retirement
- Health care
- Insurance: health, life, property, auto
- Time for self
- Time for spouse/partner, family and friends
- Other: _____

Understanding What the Business Involves

There are numerous issues to be discussed including time demands, financial obligations and business needs.

Knowing as much as possible about what the business involves will provide information needed to ask questions, share opinions and make competent decisions. Regardless of how much physical work or financial support is contributed, one may choose to participate in discussion, planning, and business decisions. Families need to determine the appropriate level of involvement for each individual depending on the circumstances. Each family situation will be different. Sometimes hurt feelings or conflict will occur when there is disagreement over the level of involvement or inclusion of specific family members. The level of involvement, compensation for work, and other topics of importance must be discussed early in the business planning.

Clarifying Work Roles

Couples must determine if they will physically work together, or if one partner will spend a majority of time on the farm/business. It may be that one partner primarily cares for the home, financial records and/or children. One or both partners may have off farm jobs. Work roles and expectations must be discussed so the couple will mutually agree on responsibilities and workload. Today, most farm and ranch families have at least one partner working off the farm to supplement farm income.

Trust, Respect, Honesty and Communication

Couples must trust and respect each other if they are to be compatible work partners. Honesty is critical for developing trust and respect. Major decisions with both the farm/ranch

business and family issues should be openly discussed and shared between partners. Keeping secrets from each other or doing things purposefully against the other's will is detrimental to relationship growth.

Partners must strive to have honest discussions about their finances and openly discuss values and expectations of what comprises an acceptable or desired standard of living. If partners agree on these key issues, they will likely enjoy the challenges presented to them throughout their experience of farming/ranching or working in business together. If they disagree on values and expectations, they will likely face some hardships.

Most couples will have disagreements over money, sex and housework. In addition, issues about children, work, extended family and time management may cause differences between partners. Farm and ranch families also must deal with many business issues within the family setting. These issues must be managed in ways that promote the well-being and growth of the intimate partner relationship, family and business. When situations are difficult, it may be hard to keep pleasure and business separate and to enjoy both. Couples must work diligently to nurture their partner relationship by expressing needs and wants, communicating openly on all issues, being sexually responsive to each other, forgiving each other when mistakes have been made, and being willing to make changes, seek advice, resolve conflict and compromise at times.

Couples who communicate effectively from a positive framework will enhance personal and business relationships. In strong relationships, positive communication is common even when problems are encountered. For example, when one partner is having a bad day and says something negative, the other will usually say something positive. They do not look for the worse in situations or in each other.

Understanding Family Needs

In many cases, the family takes the brunt of the financial and emotional burden or neglect during difficult times. Farm and ranch families have a particular challenge to balance resources between work and family. Money is often reinvested in the farm/ranch or business, with little or no money for family living expenses. If money is not invested in the business, the business will not thrive and the family will not have adequate living expenses. If the family does not have enough money to live on, their well-being suffers, love and friendship between family members is threatened, and frustration, hurt, anger and bitterness may be experienced. Ultimately the farming operation suffers. This can be a vicious circle.

As evidenced by an increase in the sale of livestock herds and family farms, these are difficult times for farmers, ranchers and those depending on the rural economy. Families may need assistance and support in addressing difficult and touchy issues and in making critical decisions that affect their business and family. Individuals must be encouraged to reach out to family and friends and formal support services when times get tough. At other times, it will be necessary for family, friends and professionals to reach out to those in need and to make appropriate referrals. Support from others is critical to the well-being, health and happiness of strong families.

Decisions must be made by the couple in the best interest of immediate family members, considering needs and wants in addition to values and beliefs. Although others may offer advice and support, it ultimately is the responsibility of the family to decide what is best for them and how to manage their relationship and business.

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