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Can't talk to one another: cause or symptom?

Initially, the idea was to focus on the responsibility for genetic selection. But after discussing the issue and hearing from our readers, we realized that we needed to consider that key component in the broader context of the distribution of powers. Among the issues involved in co-management and farm transfers, namely, financial concerns, legal worries, taxation, and the transferor's eventual retirement, the distribution of power is probably the most difficult part of the process. So let's take the time to sit down and talk about it.

I'm stressing the point because there's clear proof that it's not always easy to get a dialogue going. Indeed, after conducting a survey of 114 pairs of owners and their successors, the TRAGET Laval research group has published some telling figures (1). To take part in the study, younger respondents needed to own at least a 20-per-cent share of the farm operation, and transferors had to be between the ages of 45 and 65 and be prepared to transfer their farm within the next 10 years. Respondents were therefore co-managers and resolutely engaged in the transfer process. True to the reality of the farming world, 95 per cent of the respondent pairs were father/son duos. The results might therefore have been different had the respondents been father/daughter, mother/son or mother/daughter pairs.

The study first tells us that in only half the cases (51%) did the younger generation know exactly when their fathers would be ready to leave the farm. Nearly 90 per cent of those who didn't know estimated that the transition would occur sooner than their fathers thought it would. The remaining 10 per cent guessed the opposite.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only stage where communication is deficient. After learning that 59 per cent of the younger people interviewed had prepared a

business plan and that only 36 per cent of their fathers had drawn up a farm transfer plan, researchers crossed the data and discovered that only 24 per cent of the parent/child pairs had prepared both types of plans, and 29 per cent had neither.

Moreover, it's surprising to learn that that information is seldom shared. When owners were asked if their children had prepared a business plan, it was found that in 21 per cent of cases, although the children had done so, their fathers were sure that they had not. In 13 per cent of cases, it was the other way around, i.e. the younger generation had no plan whereas their fathers thought they did. Hence it seems that in 34 per cent of cases, the people concerned were playing hide-and-seek with essential information.

Fortunately, however, fathers and sons were on the same wavelength as to the future of the operation. In 75 per cent of cases, both parties thought that the farm would expand; in 5 per cent of cases, they thought it would remain more or less the same size. On the other hand, in 20 per cent of cases, the younger generation's vision differed from that of the retiring generation. Although not particularly surprising, that divergence does become a problem when those two individuals are required to make joint decisions.

And when it comes to the distribution of powers, that is, who does the decision making, the answers provided by both incoming and exiting generations to 13 questions on tasks to be carried out showed that they really don't know who decides. In fact, in 44 per cent of cases, fathers answered differently than their sons. Moreover, in only 23 per cent of cases did both respondents give the same answer to at least 7 of the 13 questions. Since 32 per cent of respondent pairs gave the same answers to 4 to 6 questions, and 9 per cent gave the same answers to only 1 to 3 questions, it can be deduced that in more than 40 per cent of cases the parties concerned didn't really agree on the sharing of responsibilities and, in all probability, had never discussed the matter.

Furthermore, it seems that the greater the stakes (e.g. who makes the investment decisions, particularly for the purchase of high-priced animals), the less likely fathers are to entrust their offspring with that responsibility.



Nonetheless, there are plenty of examples in the Holstein breeding community of parents and children who have successfully managed a farm transfer to the satisfaction of both generations. Unfortunately, there are others for whom the transfer process is much more difficult and comes at considerable sacrifice on the part of both children and parents. Some even give up along the way.

Who's to blame?

Any intergenerational relationship must necessarily contend with two different personalities, one that is often more progressive than the other. It would be tempting to attribute the phenomenon of difficult relations to that element alone. Alas, the problem is not that simple. While it's easy to see there's a lack of communication, the truth of the matter is that it's a little more complicated than that. As Pierrette Desrosiers, a work psychologist, speaker and business coach, specializing in the agricultural sector, points out, saying that communication is inadequate doesn't fix the problem. In reality, poor communication is often a symptom of a more complex situation. That's why it's important to start by trying to understand why communication is faulty if we hope to find a solution. To do that, we need to delve a little deeper into the personalities involved. To shed light on the question, Pierrette Desrosiers leads us to the concept of emotional intelligence, a faculty that she explains "enables us to use our emotions intelligently to better manage our thoughts and actions in order to achieve our goals." That form of intelligence includes both personal skills (self-management) and social skills (managing our relationships with others).

Ms. Desrosiers also emphasizes that emotional intelligence is an explanation for success. "Beyond a certain threshold of intelligence and technical know-how, it's the entrepreneur's emotional abilities that make the difference," she says. Fortunately, unlike the intellectual quotient, which cannot be changed, emotional intelligence can be improved through motivation and effort.

We're unaccustomed to that kind of self-improvement work, however; emotions are instead scoffed at and considered a sign of weakness. Yet, being in touch with our emotions means knowing ourselves, being mindful of our own values and needs as well as those of others, and, in particular, being aware of how our attitudes affect those around us. Hence, instead of losing control in a tense situation, we need to exercise some self-control to better deal with it. As Ms. Desrosiers points out, "We can only control what we are conscious of, but we are controlled by what we are unconscious of."

The first culprit: fear

In the depths of their being, all farmers who hope to successfully transfer their operation, as well as the younger generation interested in taking over, are well aware that the day will come when they'll have to put their cards on the table. So why is that so hard to do?

Firstly, stresses Pierrette Desrosiers, it's important to remember that fear is a multifaceted emotion that can affect the transferors as much as their young successors. First there is the fear of being misunderstood and feeling incompetent when it comes to discussing things. We may also be afraid of what the other might think of us and of being misjudged. As well, there is the fear of being overtaken by events, which can manifest itself in two ways. On the one hand, those who have little self-confidence wonder how they will ever manage to live up to the expectations of their partner. At the opposite end of the scale, those who think they are exceptional feel that they'll be unable to

accept that anyone else should be able to perform as well as they have.

For the retiring generation, there is also the fear of losing their identity. Throughout their entire lives, farmers define themselves by their profession. After selling the farm, will they feel they've lost their worth? Which leads to another question: what will they do afterwards? And then the fear of boredom sets in.

In referring to her practice with farmers and their successors, Pierrette Desrosiers also underlines that many owners are very afraid they won't be able to return to the farm after they've sold it. This in turn intensifies their fear of boredom and hinders the decision-making process. Of course, they haven't dared discuss the issue with their offspring, assuming instead that they already know the answer. But the psychologist is free to ask all the questions. She finds, on the contrary, that in many cases the son hopes his father will stay on and is even counting on his collaboration. Unfortunately, he's never talked about it either.

For some seniors, adds Ms. Desrosiers, transferring the decision-making power means facing their fear of growing old, and, as a result, they feel they're headed towards the end of their lives. That prospect prompts many farmers to avoid discussing the issue and to put off the transfer as long as possible.

Attributes that become failings

To succeed in agriculture and be one's own boss, an entrepreneur must be autonomous, independent, and able to make the right decisions. But, says Ms. Desrosiers, undertaking to co-manage and eventually effect a complete transfer of the farm may run counter to those character traits. In a co-management situation, you have to talk before you act. For some people, however, the idea of having to confer before spending is an unbearable prospect, when formerly they could buy land or farm machinery without consulting anyone.

We welcome your comments

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Being an entrepreneur often means being an individualist also. It's not always easy for that type of person to become a co-worker or partner. Emotionally speaking, co-management can be a difficult experience.

Different personalities

Generally speaking, there are some people who are real go-getters, and some who are less so. A family may include both types of individuals. An unassuming son may find it extremely difficult to follow in the footsteps of a father known for his entrepreneurial spirit. That reality may even prompt some children to move away from the farm, unable to assert themselves or make their opinions heard.

Conversely, two strong temperaments may have trouble making room for one another if their emotional skills are lacking. In some cases, sons of this personality type will deliberately opt for a career different from their fathers' in order to prove to themselves and others that they can be successful.

Some young people are a little wild

Obviously, the problems don't rest on the shoulders of the parents alone. Indeed, some highly motivated young people, with a thirst for success at any price, may tend to bite off more than they can chew. That kind of attitude forces the parents, who are more experienced, to put on the brake to avoid what they consider to be an impending disaster.

Is it really a good idea, wonders Pierrette Desrosiers, for a 20-year-old, fresh out of school, to take on a 50-percent share in a multimillion-dollar operation? Would it not be more advisable to take it by stages, so as to allow some time for experience and maturity, especially emotional maturity?

And finally, a farm transfer is often partly a gift as well. It's therefore important that successors be able to express their gratitude to their parents. Parents need to sense their children's appreciation, explains Ms. Desrosiers.

It can be done

Emotional skills include managing our emotions so we can work as a team and make better decisions; otherwise, anxiety and tempers rise. Some, however, would rather head to the fields or the barn to protect themselves, putting off the discussion in the hope that the matter will sort itself out.

Emotional intelligence includes self-discipline as well. That quality enables us to make a decision or do something that we weren't tempted to at first sight, but which, under the circumstances, proves to be the best choice (e.g. postponing the purchase of a tractor).

Transferring a farm means coming to terms with the loss and learning to let go. A father should be able to say, for example: "He'll do what he wants with it." Accordingly, he accepts the fact that he can't control everything, that the work may be done differently, and, especially, that it is possible that his child will make mistakes, but it won't be the end of the world. In that type of atmosphere, advice from the older generation is more likely to be accepted.

In reality, co-management and the transfer of farm ownership are part of a dynamic process that takes place between two or more individuals. If the dynamics of that situation are altered, the process changes. For example, domination is possible if one of the individuals allows him or herself to be dominated. As soon as that person refuses, the dynamics change. Conversely, if that person continues to put up with it, hoping to achieve his or her ends that way, the dominating personality will continue to impose his or her will. "In any relationship, we have to establish our limits, specifically, what is acceptable, tolerable and unacceptable," concludes Pierrette Desrosiers.

Extreme situations

The situations described above are common, and, with a minimum of goodwill and effort, most people are able to address the issues and adapt to the changes.

Others, on the other hand, will never manage to carry out a farm transfer without outside help. In some cases, the problems are so overwhelming that a transfer simply isn't possible, or even desirable for that matter.

As an example, let's highlight the case of an extremely narcissistic individual, i.e. someone with a gigantic ego. He thinks the world revolves around him, that he's better than everyone else, and that there isn't anything the world doesn't owe him. He is unable to recognize someone else's worth, has very little empathy, and generally crushes the people around him. Attempting to co-manage and transfer a farm under those circumstances would certainly be unrealistic. It could even be unhealthy for the other people involved.

Various mental health disorders can also lead to some unbearable situations and make the transfer process extremely difficult. Problems such as depression, bipolar disorder (manic-depressive) or extreme anxiety are some examples. When confronted with a situation of that sort, we need to look at the inability to communicate as a warning sign signalling a problem of another nature.

Such circumstances make it difficult, if not impossible, to manage alone. You may require the help of a health professional, because you'll need to clearly identify the source of the difficulties in order to resolve them.

(1) La transmission de la ferme québécoise d'une génération à l'autre : au-delà des considérations économiques, une question d'échanges, d'intégration aux tâches et de délégation du pouvoir. Elizabeth Ouellet, Jacques Tondreau, Diane Parent and Jean-Philippe Perrier, Recherches sociographiques, vol. 44, no: 1, 2003, p. 141 - 164

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