

When Generations Farm/Ranch Together

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Sharing decisions, asking for what you want, listening well, and resolving conflicts quickly can help eliminate stress among generations farming/ranching together.

Mutual enjoyment and closeness are among the benefits when parents, grown children and grandchildren farm/ranch side by side. However, conflicts may arise that develop into stressful situations.

For example, a father may hold fast to a traditional farming/ranching method while his son may push for a new one. A mother may find herself in the role of messenger between the two generations who have stopped talking to each other. Such lack of direct communication can lead to even deeper misunderstandings. Asking for what you want, listening well, and working to resolve conflicts quickly can help with some of these problems.

When two and three generations work closely on a farm/ranch, tensions over a person's need for privacy may result. Allowing grown children the space they need to learn to function as independent adults is imperative. As long as emotional needs outweigh financial ones, separate households for married children are probably preferable. The importance of defining individual boundaries — different traditions, activities and priorities — must be maintained. Finally, patience and understanding are called for with spouses who were not raised on the farm/ranch.

Researchers have found that farm/ranch families with open communication, shared decision making and long-range planning for normal family changes (child turning 13, last child leaving home, retirement) handle stress better than those with closed communication, authoritarian decision-making and day-to-day planning. Family members may need to improve their skills in reaching a consensus, being assertive or solving problems. Here are some time-tested methods of handling problems that may arise:

- Identify what the problem is and who is involved.
- Hold a family meeting with those involved in the problem.
- Use problem-solving techniques.

Begin problem solving by gathering the family and establishing a positive atmosphere, free from interruptions. Help family members identify the specific problem at hand and determine whose problem it is. For example, one person's behavior is a problem to someone else because it is interfering in some tangible way with another person satisfying a need. (Learn to accept differences in values.)

Next, identify what each person involved in the problem really wants. As a group, brainstorm all possible solutions. Remember these brainstorming rules: allow no criticism of any solutions until you are finished; encourage creative, wild ideas; get as many ideas as possible; build on solutions already suggested.

Once the brainstorming is complete, evaluate each solution by listing its pros and cons. Through compromise arrive at a consensus about the best solution; that is, arrive at a solution all of you can live with for now. Decide who will do what when and how. Make sure each person is clear about his or her part of the agreement. Then, put your plan into action on a trial basis, say for a month.

Finally, meet after a month to figure out what worked and what did not. It may be necessary to try another solution.

Of course it's best if no problems ever arise. But achieving such harmony will take some effort. Your family may find success by following these guidelines.

- Avoid "What if . . ." fantasies and "if it wasn't for. . ." regrets. Think about what's happening now.
- Ask for what you want directly: "What I'd like from you is. . ." Remember the other person is free to say yes or no.
- Recognize and appreciate individuals for their contributions. If you feel you are not getting enough attention, ask for it
- Check what another person really wants from you. This is a good way to get expectations out in the open.
- Check whether the other person heard you accurately. "Would you please tell me what you heard me say?"
- Make your own traditions. Schedule an annual family get-together at a nearby lake.
- Or go camping together. Get everyone involved.
- Let children share in the decision about where to go and what to do. Organize a ball game with new rules and handicaps so that in the end everybody feels good.

The togetherness of a multiple-generation farm/ranch operation can be a source of stress as well as satisfaction. By allowing people time and space to be themselves and to do some things their way, each generation can establish its own independence while maintaining close family ties.

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