

The Business Of Farming: Family Communications

By S. D. Parsons

There has been a surprising response to the articles on inter-generational transfer. I say surprising because it is not usual for Zimbabwean farmers to write or phone on matters of this type. Apparently the question of family unity and the need for communication has struck a chord with readers of *The Farmer*. Some of those comments were angry and bitter at what fate has dealt them, some were sad, some were desperate, but they all have a common theme – they are all looking for a solution. That being the case it encourages me to expand the discussion to other issues concerning the family. The one I think is of greatest importance is how to communicate.

Difference of opinion results in family discord, long-term family divisions, extreme bitterness or worse. The essential problem is that we don't communicate. Yes, of course we do talk to one another, but that is communication on the most elementary level. It seldom achieves the objective of determining what individuals really feel, or what they want out of life. As one lady said. "We make assumptions about our children's feelings and wants but so often we're wrong." Caught up in the routine of life one day runs into the next without any time being devoted to determining what the business means to each person.

Family conflicts and arguments are perhaps the single most important issue in small businesses, especially family businesses, but they are seldom or never discussed. Yet it is *the* issue that has the greatest bearing on the successful outcome of the most important element in the business -- the family.

The most common mistake is not understanding that the purpose of the business is to help us each achieve what we want out of life. After all, a business is not an end in itself. The purpose of the business is to help you achieve other things in your life, whether that is an educated family, a sense of belonging, or the pure enjoyment of achievement. As someone once said most of us have a fulltime job and half time life. What does each member of the family want out of life and how should the business be structured to help them achieve what they want? In my experience that question is never posed.

Do your family and yourself a favour -- do something about it while you can. Find out from each stakeholder in the business (owners and non-owners) what he or she wants out of life and out of the business. You will be surprised how communication of this sort increases motivation and contentment and de-creates unnecessary friction. It is much better to precipitate a crisis under con-trolled conditions than to let it erupt when you can least afford to deal with it.

The best way to precipitate family crises of this sort is to sit down and decide upon a common vision and set of goals as to where the business should be heading. Common visions are essential in any business, particularly so for small family-operated businesses. Achieving a common vision is a function of good communication. Good internal communication is critical. It requires that each man or woman be able to express his or her personal thoughts and ideas without fear or favour. This is the time to let others know how you feel. Tell them what you expect out of life, and what you want out of the business, and how the business can help you achieve your personal goals. Express your opinion and let others express theirs equally about the present and the future as well.

Common visions mean that we are pulling in the same direction, not wasting our energy working against one another.

The technique we use in the Business Link was developed by the Intercultural Affairs organisation. We now know it as the "sticky sheet" process because we use post-it® notes to establish each person's ideas and thoughts. In my next article I will outline the basic procedure but it would be far preferable to get hands-on training from the seminars that I hope will be organised by the Brown-Gilpin team in conjunction with the CFU.

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