

Communication Skills to Deal With Farm Stress

By Roger T. Williams

Most families find communication to be interesting and difficult. Each of us is a unique individual with his or her own beliefs, feelings, needs and agendas. It's not always easy to be heard or to get our unique needs and agendas met within the family setting.

Communication can be even more difficult in farm families. Why? For one thing, farm family members live and work side-by-side. There is no separation between work and family and the tensions of farming often spill over into the family arena. But there is another factor as well. Farming often involves intergenerational or multi-family arrangements and significant tensions can develop between father and son, between mother and daughter-in-law, or between the various families involved in a family corporation.

It helps if farm families understand a basic concept: **interpersonal issues are a lot like weeds—they don't go away unless you root them out and, if left alone, they can choke out the crop.** Farm families need to find ways of promoting self worth and preventing interpersonal conflict so interpersonal issues don't "choke out the crop." The following skills can be helpful in doing this.

- 1) **Practice the art of active listening.** Active listening involves paraphrasing or restating the other person's ideas **and** feelings in the listener's own words. It's a way of drawing out the other person and checking on whether you really heard what the speaker was saying. The active listener avoids evaluating what the other person has said and refrains from blaming, interpreting, persuading or giving advice to the other person. You simply feed the message back in a caring way that encourages a response. The use of certain phrases lets the other person know that you are actively listening. These include: "I hear you saying ____." "It sounds like you ____." "You seem to be feeling ____."
- 2) **Watch for early warning signals that conflict is just around the corner.** External signals (in others) include sarcasm, teasing, nit-picking, criticism, yelling, avoidance, and the stony, silent glare. Internal signs (in yourself) include accelerated heart rate, faster and shallower breathing, increased muscle tension, butterflies in the stomach, and cold clammy hands. These external and internal signals indicate that there is tension occurring within a relationship. It's important to recognize these signals, pay attention to them, and take some action to head off future conflict. Remember that conflict can be good if it makes people aware that a problem exists and if it causes them to become involved in solving that problem.
- 3) **Share something of yourself—disclose what you are thinking, feeling and wanting.** One of the biggest problems in communication is not knowing what other persons are thinking, feeling or wanting. Sharing our thoughts and feelings sometimes involves risk—risk that the other person won't listen or care; risk that your wants and needs will conflict with those of other persons. But it's the only way others can know what we want and need in our relationships. It's also helpful to share what you are willing to do to resolve a conflict. Use of the following statements can be helpful: "I sense that we're in conflict over this issue." "I'm concerned (or worried, anxious, afraid) about it." "What I'd really like is ____." "I'm willing to ____ to resolve the issue."

- 4) **When you feel angry, count to 10...or 50...or 1000 and then report this anger to the other person.** The two most common forms of dealing with anger—burying it and exploding at others—are not very effective. Burying it hurts the person who is angry and exploding at others hurts those other people. It's helpful to take a few moments (or a few hours) to cool off and reflect on the situation--to get in touch with what you are thinking, feeling and wanting. Then **report** this anger to the other person in ways that encourage a productive response. Use words that **describe** what the person did or what happened to make you angry. Here is an example of phrases that communicate anger without putting the other person on the defensive: "John, I was angry at you when _____. I don't like feeling that way. What can we do to resolve this issue?"
- 5) **Use one-minute criticisms as a way of expressing interpersonal gripes in families.** One-minute criticisms (delivered in a minute or less) can be an important problem-solving tool since they allow individuals to raise concerns and feelings without demeaning or demoralizing the other person. The following guidelines should be kept in mind when giving one-minute criticisms: a) focus on the other person's **behavior** (what's bugging you), b) do it soon (unless you're angry), c) express your true feelings (if angry or resentful, say so), d) stop for a moment of silence, e) emphasize that you value the other person, f) give support through touch, g) allow time for the other person to respond, and h) recognize that the criticism is over. Criticism can be an important problem-solving tool, but **not** when it's used to punish or demean the other person.
- 6) **Use one-minute praisings as a way of expressing support and caring in families.** A supportive, caring family will be in a much better position to deal with conflict when it does arise. One-minute praisings provide other people with positive feedback on something they've done. Thus, it's one of the best tools for strengthening an individual's self-concept **and** for creating a supportive climate within farm families. Guidelines to be kept in mind for one-minute praisings are: a) focus on the other person's **behavior** (what you liked or appreciated), b) do it soon, c) express your true feelings (if happy, say so!), d) stop for a moment of silence, e) emphasize how much you value the other person, f) give support through touch, and g) encourage more of the same behavior.
- 7) **Use adult-to-adult problem-solving in farm businesses that involve intergenerational arrangements.** Significant problems arise if a parent treats a son or daughter like a child when that person is a full-grown adult. Parent-type actions such as finger pointing, head shaking, and use of such evaluative words as "always," "never," "remember," "you ought to know better," and "if I were you" can get in the way of intergenerational problem-solving. Problems also arise when adult children fall back into kid-like behaviors (using Mom as a conduit rather than approaching Dad with problems or ideas) or when either party resorts to profanity or name-calling. It's important that both parties in the relationship treat each other as adults and enter into a mutual problem-solving process that involves: a) a clear definition of the problem, b) a look at what options are available, c) an exploration of which option will work best, and d) the choice of a specific course of action. Problem-solving works best when it's focused on one issue—try not to bring up past history or solve all of your problems at one time.

Since farm and family issues are closely intertwined, minor issues can escalate into major conflicts within a short time. Thus, it's important to deal with interpersonal issues when they first arise—when there is a low level of emotions, little distortion of the other person's position, a reasonable level of trust, and a willingness to listen to the other person. The skills outlined above should be helpful in promoting self worth and in preventing interpersonal conflict. Try them—they work!

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