

Sometimes you have to speak your mind:

“Peace at any cost” is no way to run a business

Halloween is over for another year, but in many a farm family's closet lurk ghosts of a different kind — ancestors' values and habits that get in the way of progress

BY JUDY WALTERS



When farm families find themselves going around in circles, unable to solve problems and get on with life, it's often because they're haunted by the ghosts of their ancestors.

They're acting out behavior patterns passed down from earlier generations. Whether or not they realize it, they handle problems and make decisions like their predecessors. And let's face it, what worked for our parents and grandparents will not necessarily get us where we want to go today.

Consider a typical family: The patriarch, Frank, is a rugged, trail-blazing individualist who runs the farm the way he wants. Like his father before him, he doesn't talk much about his plans and seems largely indifferent to the feelings of others.

His wife Mary alternates between being a martyr and a mediator. Like her mother and mother-in-law, she worries and frets about how they're going to keep the farm going. She also acts as both sounding board and go-between for her husband and their son David who is farming with them.

David is frustrated. He wants to strengthen and diversify the farm and prove himself. Sometimes, he simply goes ahead and does what he thinks should be done, regardless of what his folks say. In other words, he's behaving exactly like Frank. And like Mary, David's wife Ellen alternates between insisting things have to change and accepting that they never will.

"History repeats itself, especially within families," says Lorne Owen, a farm management specialist with the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

People are products of their upbringing. If parents are honest, hard-working, and kind-hearted, chances are their children will be, too. Parents who are workaholics, given to angry outbursts, sly in their business dealings, or inclined to "drink their troubles away" tend to have children who follow suit. Like old habits, family values and behavior patterns die hard.

Every family has rules and expectations, explains Owen. These rules govern conduct, aspirations, and interpersonal relations. They even govern personal values. Family rules and values are sometimes out in the open. Usually, though, they're unspoken.

Strange as it sounds, "don't talk" and "don't feel" are perhaps the most common and destructive of these rules. In some "no-talk" families, problems are either denied or ignored in the hopes they will go away. In others, problems may be put up on the table, but discussion is restricted to family members. Seeking consolation or advice from outsiders is taboo.

A classic example is the family of an alcoholic. Everyone pretends everything is perfectly normal. If evidence

Family values that worked well for previous generations may no longer be appropriate ...Dad isn't always right

of the disease (poor work performance, or an accident) becomes undeniable, relatives cover for the loved one. Seeking professional help is not an option because that would amount to airing the family's dirty laundry in public.

In "don't feel" families, feelings never get factored into discussions about the farm's management and future. If Mom is hurt by Dad's sharp words, or scared expansion will bankrupt the farm, that's her problem. If one son feels he's obligated to take over the business when he'd really rather be a musician, and the second son feels he's better suited to running the farm, neither may ever get a chance to discuss their feelings, much less realize their dreams.

Other well-intentioned family rules with destructive potential include keeping the peace (at any cost), respecting and obeying your parents (unquestioningly and unfailingly), not rocking the boat or challenging the status quo, being strong (never afraid or unsure), being perfect, and being successful (materially and financially).

"Families can find themselves locked into all kinds of roles and recurring battles," says Owen. "Inherited behavior patterns dictate anything from who does what job to how decisions are made, how money is handled, what family members talk

about and how they talk to each other, right down to how people think, feel, and spend their free time." Rifts between branches of a family or between older and younger members can recur generation after generation.

The problem with old family rules and behavior patterns, adds Owen, is that while they may have worked well for previous generations, "they are no longer useful, appropriate, or beneficial."


Dad isn't always right. Being hard-headed and hard-nosed may be advantageous when starting a farm, but passing that farm to the next generation requires a softer, more consultative touch. Parents need to be challenged if they're being unfair or making poor business decisions. Protecting the peace doesn't make sense if people are miserably unhappy. And maintaining the status quo is shortsighted if a new business direction is necessary to keep the farm competitive.

As situations change, says Owen, so should people's attitudes and behaviors. Behaviors should be helpful and appropriate to today's situation, not yesterday's.

So, how do you exorcise family ghosts? The first step is to become aware that you are playing out a drama that has plagued your family perhaps for generations. The second step is to try doing something different, recommends Owen. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, you can't keep doing the same thing and expect to get different results.

If one family member refuses to play along with the ancestral script, says Owen, others may follow. But remember, you can't force other people to change. You can only change yourself.

Don't rebel for the sake of rebelling, he cautions. "If you do the opposite of what you're expected to do, you're still being controlled by your family pattern."

Instead, express your needs and do what you truly believe is right. Follow your heart as well as your head. And let the chips fall where they may. Regardless of the outcome, you'll have broken free of the chains that constrained you. You'll be rid of your old family ghosts and feel a whole lot better about yourself. 

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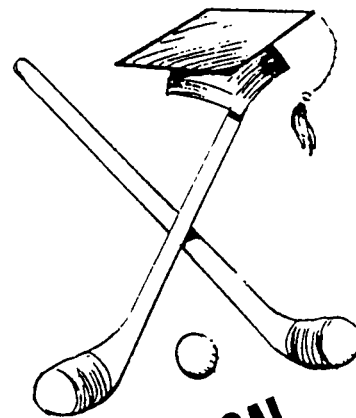
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