

# Slugging it out is no way to solve a business disagreement

**R**unning a business is difficult at the best of times, and especially so if it's a family business. Family and business roles are easily confused. Words are misinterpreted. Tempers can flare.

Farm families sometimes find themselves embroiled in bitter disputes — or harboring deep unspoken resentments. The causes are as varied as the business of farming.

Maybe someone's habit of leaving the fuel tank empty drives you bats. Perhaps you begrudge another family member's shorter work day. Or you're mad because your parents do the books and refuse to let you see them.

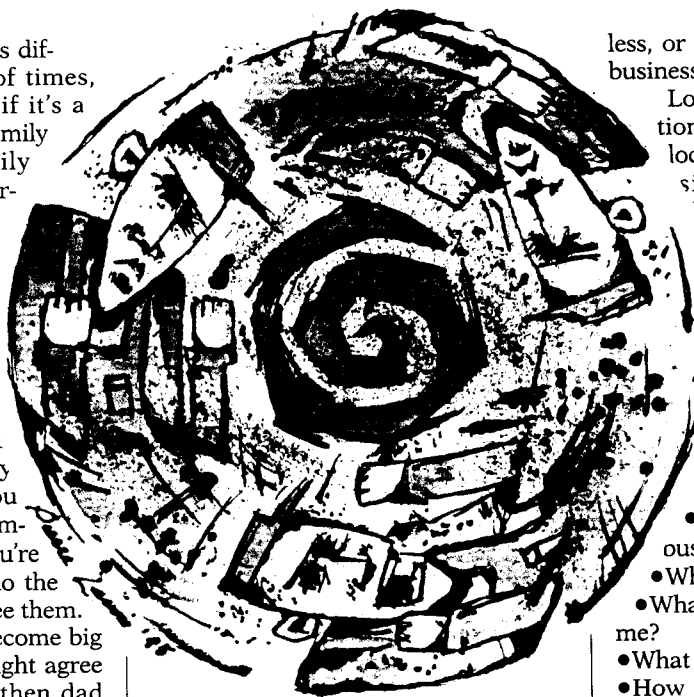
Business decisions also become big bones of contention. You might agree on a budget, for example, then dad shows up with a new pick-up he got a "great deal" on. Or 2 of you are still in the middle of discussing (so you thought) exactly what you need on that new tractor when your brother goes out and buys the one he wants.

Regardless of the cause, unless disagreements are resolved promptly, they erode family relations and maybe even the financial health of your business. But suppose you've tried everything you can think of and are still deadlocked — what's the next move?

"Stop. Stand to one side," advises B.C. ag. ministry farm management specialist Lorne Owen. "Analyze what's going on. Make sure you're not engaged in a power struggle or fighting with the past."

Farm families often get mired in old issues, explains Owen. Disagreements may have their roots in past events, resentment, one-upmanship, guilt, control, jealousy, insecurity, disappointment, and unmet needs. Maybe a sibling isn't so much upset by your work habits as by the fact that as kids you had a horse and she didn't.

Sometimes, too, the stated issue is a front for some other frustration. A wife complains that her husband is



***Too often, family farms are breeding grounds for family feuds. Arguments between business partners are sometimes unavoidable, but here's how to make them constructive rather than destructive***

always late for meals; he counters that she's nagging. In reality, she may simply want him to say he notices and appreciates her efforts, and vice versa.

If "old garbage" or "emotional baggage" are getting in the way of harmonious relationships, suggests Owen, find out how the people you work and live with really feel; what's bugging them; why they're hurt; what they're afraid of or worried about.

Owen lists 4 primary causes of conflict: people feel unappreciated or misunderstood, unjustly treated, power-

less, or frustrated because family and business roles seem all mixed up.

Look at family roles and expectations. Family members often get locked into roles — "the strong, silent dad"; "the sounding-board mom"; "the rebellious child". They're immobilized by family values and expectations.

Defining family values and expectations is an exercise that can yield some surprising insights. Get each family member to write down their answers to the following questions:

- What's the purpose of this business?
- What does this family stand for?
- What do I expect this farm to give me?
- What does the family expect of me?
- How are we supposed to treat each other?

Discuss your answers. Having each family member list goals and priorities can be equally revealing.

When others explain their feelings, don't judge them or defend yourself. Just listen. Often, all they need is to unload. But really listen. Family members often believe they "know" each other, notes Owen, but if they did, they'd have fewer disagreements.

One way to make sure everyone is understood and understands each other is to play parrot — summing up what the other person has said. Frequent parrot practice is advised. Active, sincere listening shortens and prevents arguments.

Through this "restating", you can validate feelings that have been expressed and offer assurance that you have heard and do understand.

Try to turn negative complaints into positive requests. If, for example, mom the bookkeeper is reaming you out for spending money without telling her, try something like this: "You say you need me to tell you what cheques I've written so you can balance the book at month end." This reinforces the request for both parties.

When discussing business and family issues, make sure everybody gets equal air time. If one person dominates the conversation or keeps interrupting, try the 10-button technique.

Everybody starts with 10 buttons. When you speak, you must put down a button. Once you've used all your buttons, you must button up!

Once the past and people's feelings have been addressed, move on to the problem at hand. Be sure to separate the people from the problem, cautions Owen. If you see the other party as the problem, chances are, you'll spend your time and energy attacking them, and never get around to the problem.

Define the problem. Be precise. To get specific results, you must file specific grievances. "You're not pulling your weight around here" won't wash. "You don't spend enough time with me and the kids" is not helpful.

Instead of lodging vague complaints, explain exactly what you want: "I want you to enter all receipts into the computer by the end of each month", or "I'd like you to finish chores early on Sunday so we can all go cross-country skiing together." Anyone, child or adult, can address concrete requests like these.

Next, negotiate. Don't make the mistake of taking a position and putting all your energy into advancing or defending it. Positional arguing is inefficient. Seldom does it produce the wisest possible solution. At best, you get a compromise.

"Be willing to let go," says Owen. "Don't get married to a position. But also avoid limiting yourself to meet-you-in-the-middle compromises." Instead of bickering over how to split the pie, look for ways to enlarge the pie, or bake a whole new one.

### Negotiating has 4 phases

- Talk. Tell each other what you want and why. Focus on goals and wishes, not positions. Chances are, you'll discover you have more in common than in conflict. Be blunt but thorough in stating your wishes. Otherwise, you'll end up like the 2 chefs who each got half an orange when one wanted the juice and the other wanted the rind.

- Brainstorm — together. Dream up all the solutions you can think of. Be creative; the sky's the limit. Suspend judgment; don't debate an idea's feasibility. Entertain all suggestions, no

matter how crazy they seem. Later, discuss those that look most promising. Look for areas of mutual interest and gain. Try for win-win solutions.

- If you can't reach an immediate resolution, decide what criteria to use in resolving your dispute. Be objective. Criteria might include precedents; experts' opinions; industry standards or practices; scientific studies; the going price or the best price; what's most efficient; or what's equitable, traditional, or fits community standards.

Relying on third-party yardsticks, benchmarks, or authority keeps you from getting entangled in a no-win

battle of wills. It also defuses tension and prevents hard feelings.

- Reach a decision and put the disagreement behind you. Have each person summarize his or her understanding of the deal just struck and who is responsible for what. This reduces the risk of further dissension.

A good agreement is one that resolves the matter wisely, efficiently, and amicably. Never forget that in a family setting, your relationship with the person you're arguing with is far, far more important than the cause of your disagreement or the outcome of your negotiations. CG

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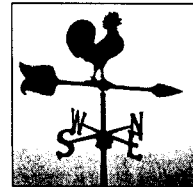
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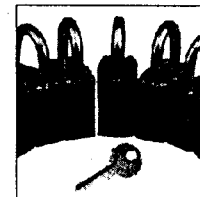
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