

# 'HE LOVES FARMING, BUT FEELS IT'S HOPELESS'

BY MIKE WILSON



## **Farm wife looks for answers to the silence between husband and son**

ONCE IN A great while we get notes from readers looking for help with difficult family business problems. That was certainly the case when we received the following letter from a farm wife, who asked us to publish her letter anonymously:

*"I am the wife of a crop and cattle farmer who is in partnership with two brothers. My 38-year-old son has worked with his dad and uncles for six-plus years now and can't seem to advance.*

*"My intentions are not to put the farm family down; I am just disappointed and need to know if I can do or say something to get their attention. I think you can gather that the wives seem to not be included in plans here. I am little informed. I've been in the family for 40 years, and never caused a riff. But I need to know the future for my son. He has no say whatsoever; he is a hired hand. He had hope, but is now depressed and ready to go somewhere*

*else. He loves farming, but feels it's hopeless.*

*"It's sad to me that my own husband, my son's dad, will not talk about this. He becomes hostile, like I'm taking something from him. I have fought this in my heart and mind for decades. We all have a good surface relationship but avoid speaking about future plans for our children. My husband is not willing to talk at all; he just becomes quiet. If I talk to my son alone or ride with him in the semi, my husband tends to be more hostile toward my son. I have decided my son needs action, and I am determined to get him support. I have made bad decisions and so has my son, but he is a great human being and deserves more. I just need to know if I am right to want resolution. What is my position as the wife and mother of the generation to help carry on the operation? There are cousins and siblings to consider, too."*

## **THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN** **'I think he should leave'**

Your situation is not unique. Many very traditional

farmers are the same way. Most family businesses are not just closely held, they are hermetically sealed.

Consultants would be a great help, but I very much doubt the family would be willing to pay for, let alone listen to, an outsider, no matter how capable and experienced they are.

If the son has tried to bring the issue up and has been met with hostility, and since he's only been there six years and hasn't wasted his whole life yet, I think he should leave.

He might try looking at one of the Ag Link programs several states have, which would help him find an opportunity to work with someone who is looking for a successor.

Or if he wants to stay in the area, he might talk to one or more of the more successful operators to see if they need anyone. And talk to employees and family members to see if the manager's or owner's communication style is any different from his father's. There's no use living in misery.

The wife might also see if her husband would be willing to read any of the books that talk about this issue.



*Danny Klinefelter*

Try "The Farm Whisperer," by David Specht. She could also see if the husband might be willing to attend The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP), where he'll hear about this issue and meet a lot of other top producers who have already successfully dealt with this issue.

— *Texas A&M ag economist Danny Klinefelter*

### **'A future held hostage'**

This can be a tricky situation to navigate. I empathize with your desire to advocate for your son by bringing up this topic with your husband and his family. But I believe that if your ultimate goal as a parent is for your son to grow and advance both personally and professionally, I would urge you to approach it in this way. Encourage your son to start a one-on-one conversation with his dad about the future of the farm. Then your son has the opportunity to directly ask his dad about his vision for his (your son's) role in that future.

Suggest that your son share his feelings openly and honestly during the conversation. He might share aspects like how much the family operation means to him and how much he appreciates the opportunity to work on the family farm.

As you're encouraging your son to have this conversation, help him also understand that if he does this, he must also accept that one possible outcome is deciding to leave the farm and go elsewhere. That's ultimately



Darren Frye

his right and his choice.

In my 20s, my situation was similar to your son's. I talked with my dad many times about my future with the farm. I wanted to understand what his vision was for me, but his responses made it clear that I wouldn't have the opportunity for more leadership responsibility until he retired, which for him, meant until after he passed away.

I made the tough decision to leave the family farm and seek my own path, but I didn't ever resent his decisions as the farm's leader and owner.

Help your son understand that it will be best for him to initiate a conversation with his dad, because not talking about these issues openly is only creating depression and uncertainty. My hope is that your son and his dad will ultimately be drawn closer together through this open, honest conversation.

- What skill sets and strengths does your son bring to the table, and how do they complement skills and experience of dad and uncles?
- Has your son had any performance feedback to indicate where his strengths lie, areas of improvement needed and what he needs to advance in the business?

There are multiple dynamics at play here with potential sensitivity and pushback from many fronts: dad/husband and two uncles, spouses, nieces, nephews, etc. Are there other cousins who are interested in similar opportunities? Have the three brothers had a conversation about their views on family employment policy? If not, they certainly should, as your son may not be the only one to confront this challenge. The ground rules concerning who will be considered to advance in the family business should be clearly defined by the controlling owners.

Spouses may have been silent partners to date. But if they are on the dotted line signing loan documents and land purchase agreements, and have a vested interest in the business success or failure, their views should be welcomed in shaping the farm business's family employment policy.

**"You are on the precipice of transitioning from Stage 2 to Stage 3, a transition stage where 90% of family businesses fail to survive." — DICK WITTMAN**

I think your son will learn critical information to help him make good decisions — and know he's being proactive about his future, rather than feeling his future is being "held hostage" in some way. This is a major step for your son's leadership capacity and capability, and that's an absolutely critical skill if he hopes to lead and advance his career — whether on the family farm or through another opportunity.

— Darren Frye, president and CEO, Water Street Solutions

### 'Start talking!'

My first response is, if your son was interested in investing in or advancing in a business other than the family farm, who should be making the request — your son, or you, his mother, on your son's behalf? The answer to this question exposes the culture of the family-run business. Is this a family farm business expected to run professionally, adhering to proven management practices followed by other successful businesses? Or is it a lifestyle family farm, whose core purpose is to serve family goals and values?

I suggest your family members address the following questions.

- Have the three brothers had any communication or made plans concerning their succession plan?



Dick Wittman

Will the "principle of merit" be the dictating criterion, where consideration for employment or advancement is based on skills, experience, buy-in to business core values and willingness to be accountable? Or will the "principle of entitlement" rule — if you're family, you're owed a job?

Decisions on who should carry on the family farm business legacy become increasingly complex as Stage 1 businesses (owner-operated) shift to Stage 2 (sibling partnerships) and eventually Stage 3 (cousin collaborations). You are on the precipice of transitioning from Stage 2 to Stage 3, a transition stage where 90% of family businesses fail to survive. Those who do survive have consistently done so only by adhering to professional governance structures, policies and practices. Start talking! **FF**

— Dick Wittman, Idaho rancher and farm business consultant