

Facilitating Communication in Farm Families with Personalized Coaching

Project Director: Leslie Forstadt, University of Maine Cooperative Extension

Situation

The Farm Communication Coaching program provides a unique opportunity for farmers to participate in multiple sessions of coaching with two coaches. The issues they bring to the table are selected by the farmers, and the structure of activities is guided by the coaches. Communication skills are critical to farm success, but are frequently overlooked – or seen as secondary to production and business skills. It is often seemingly inconsequential communication skills that are extremely important in providing solutions to many of the risks (human, financial, and more) that farmers face.

Two second generation sibling farmers and their partners came to coaching with challenges in maintaining both farming on the family property, as well as other jobs they held off the farm. The mounting concerns included finances, housing, stress, and the mental and physical health of disabled elder parents who were living on farm in unsafe conditions.

Outcomes

The four young farmers deeply valued family and worked productively, sharing the airtime so all could speak and learn about each other through the coaching activities. They had to focus on both the multiple present crises, as well as long-term planning. They

defined shared values, identified roles, and divided actionable steps that they each were willing to take. One sibling left their off-farm job to develop and grow the farm and take on more responsibility. Together, the four farmers reviewed and brainstormed division of labor, markets, scale, enterprises, and addressed their finances. During the time of coaching, regular meetings were held and record keeping improved significantly. One sibling addressed the legal and financial paperwork, and the other addressed the parents' medical concerns. They made significant progress on their plans. They met short-term goals, and are actively working toward long-term goals. The 2nd generation began to pay themselves from the farm for the first time, and one family took a vacation for the first time!

Impacts

One sibling farmer decided to get medical help for anxiety, and was surprised to learn that they had a medical condition; their health is much improved now and they are working back on the farm full-time with their partner and young child. Reported sales are up, and both families are being paid regularly for the first time. The farmers have more warmth and feel more acceptance of their aging parents' disabilities. They are accessing resources and supports to specifically address health, safety, financial and business needs, and to pursue goals for staying together as a family farm. During their time in coaching they increased skills, changed on-farm practices, and built valuable resilience.



"[Coaching] gave us a third party to [whom we could] voice our concerns, feel validated about them, and gave [us] resources for dealing with our issues. It became apparent that our main stress is farm succession and housing, which we are all now addressing."

- Maine Farmer





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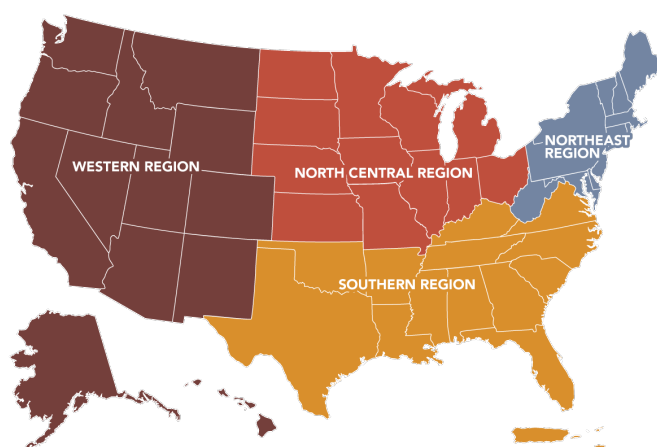
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