

## The Business Of Farming: Education – a better alternative

By S. D. Parsons

The 'Next Generation' seminar we held in Hare the week before Christmas was an eye-opener for me and the farm families – parents and older children – who participated. Originally designed as an introduction to business management it turned out to be as much a revealing exercise in communication between the generations. Yes, we did discuss various aspects of business, but the real highlight was the discussions that took place between generations and within families.

Sitting in mixed groups of five or six people, with parents seated separately from their own children, the discussions were lively and involved everyone. Later we separated the age groups asking each to consider and answer questions posed by the other. In response to the parents' question, "What life skills does the current system not give you?" the younger generation answered: we lack business skills and international awareness; we would like to speak more languages. We have not been encouraged to question and our communication skills are poor. We need more cultural activities and a greater awareness of music and the ability to play musical instruments.

To the surprise of older generations over the aeons the younger generation has always done better than expected. This generation will be no different. They will do well. In fact, in a recent issue the *Economist*<sup>1</sup> points in a major article on youth, it is the younger people under 25 who will dominate business not when they're old and over 30, but now! With their computer skills and global network those who are not entrepreneurs will be independent skill workers selling their services to the highest bidder as they move from job to job. Increasingly they are rejecting traditional university education and honing instead skills unknown to the older generations.

Young Zimbabweans who do not have the same opportunities as young Americans need to be encouraged so that they can take their place in this increasingly competitive world. I am heartened by the way the group I worked with questioned their parents and responded to the serious issues the workshop raised. For instance:

*Are you interested in the business?* Yes we are, but don't force us to work for you. Our plans for the future may be different from yours. Let us make our own mistakes

*What are your frustrations?* The poor communication between parents and children. The way you worry and the constant, monotonous pessimism you impose on us. We understand that there are major problems facing the business and the country. We do want to discuss them, but in the proper place and not the constant drip, drip at every meal and social function. You

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<sup>1</sup> The Economist, December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000 – January 5<sup>th</sup> 2001

can kill our enthusiasm by harping on the subject the whole time. We would like quality family time when we don't always discuss business.

In a previous article I was critical about the technical training that passes for an education and promised an alternative this week. How can we best equip those members of our families who may wish to be business people? At the outset I want to emphasise that my remarks are addressed at the person who wants to run his or her own business. For those who choose to work for someone else as accountants, engineers, scientists, farm managers or whatever, the current system probably suffices. But for the would-be self-employed the system stinks.

My thoughts on the best way to start a member of the younger generation in business are hardly revolutionary, but I think the path is often muddled by lack of thought and planning. Sending them off to work for someone else for a year or two before they come back to the farm, is hardly the best way to offer them the kind of education they need if they have to make a start elsewhere. And even if they don't go away is this really the best we can do? Of course they'll mature. They may learn to take orders. They may even learn what it means to get their hands dirty, but at the end of it will they know how to run a business?

One possibility might be that instead of sending the youngster off for further tertiary education we should consider starting a new business together. But, for the purpose of this exercise let us complicate that scenario just a little by saying the new business will not be in the same field as the one with which the parents are familiar.

In this new business the older generation's purpose is to provide the guidance and support - and possibly even the financial guarantee for the new venture. But if you were to be the banker would you lend the money without knowing the purpose and the payback terms? I would hope not – and that is how the educational process begins. I can think of no better way to get someone started as a business person than through real world hands on experience with the steadying influence of a mentor, a person who has been there before to act as a guide, councillor and sounding board.

But let us be quite clear about this. I am not suggesting that junior simply works for dad. We already know that is a path fraught with problems. Instead the younger folk are in charge as the managers and decision makers. I am talking about a new business, where the business is planned from scratch with the primary goal of creating a stand-alone business, and not merely a job. Scary? Of course it is, mainly because the older generation is as ignorant about how to start a business in a new field as the next generation is. Our problem is that we are technicians – precisely the trap we wish to avoid for our children. However, working together on a new project both generations might learn and grow.

If you have children who are either currently involved in business, or may one day wish to run a business of their own, might this be a good time to discuss

how a business should be run? As Michael Gerber says in his book. The E-Myth, "The problem isn't your business. The problem is *you* and will always be until you change your perspective about a business and how it works"<sup>2</sup>.

I hope you'll think seriously about this whole question of education for the next generation. After all isn't this one of your most important roles as a parent?

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<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Gerber, The E-Myth. Harper Business 1986