

The Business Of Farming: Sticky Sheet Technique

By S.D. Parsons

In my last article I discussed the importance of communication to establish family unity and avoid conflict, but how does one go about getting the whole family on track with a common purpose and common vision –without causing conflict? Sadly our communication skills are greatly under-developed. We are good at telling but poor at really listening. So seldom do we really know what other members of the family, or partners in the business want, or whether they are satisfied and happy with the current situation. Instead, we are inclined to view their attempts at change as nothing but sour grapes or ungratefulness.

I was fortunate some years ago to attend a two-day seminar during which I learned what we now call the 'sticky sheet' process. I originally wrote this article describing this two-day process in brief, but my wife and partner of many years, called a halt. The technique works very well but as she correctly pointed out a half-baked description poorly understood and applied would do more harm than good. For that reason I have decided to give but a brief overview of the four-step procedure. Each step involves each individual jotting down on post-it® notes (in no more than four words on each note) a series of single statements in response to questions posed in the following four steps, namely:

1. getting everyone's input on how they would like to see the business structured.
2. determining obstacles that might prevent one from achieving the vision.
3. brainstorming strategic actions to overcome the constraints or blockages to achieve the vision, and
4. deciding on and prioritising preliminary goals for completion during the first year and finalising an action and timeline plan.

You may be surprised, or more likely, sceptical about setting aside two days for this activity. It does sound like a lot of time to merely find out what everyone in the family, or the business, expects. But that is just the point. It does take time. Moreover the process doesn't end when everyone has expressed their views on how they want the business structured so as to achieve what they want out of life. That just the first step. If the process doesn't include an action plan you will merely have wasted your time.

Even if it does not take two days, at the very least makes sure that there is a night between steps two and three to allow time to 'sleep on it' and to have second thoughts. The process is relatively straightforward, but it does require the input of every individual stakeholder in the business (e.g., owners, family members, decision-making employees), and it does require undisturbed time.

A major plus is that this process can be used even with large groups. I have used it most successfully with as many as 70 participants. That being the case there is no reason to leave out key players and owners whether they are actively involved in the business or not. Incidentally don't leave out minor children. Their views and ambitions can be quite vital in determining the future of any family owned business. I know that clients of mine have involved children as young as seven to good effect.

This technique is the best way I know of getting everyone's input and in ensuring family unity and common purpose through real communication. Inevitably a session like this leads to the clarification of so many issues that are usually ignored till they reach crisis proportions. Where will parents living expenses come from in old age? Who stays on the farm and who goes? What will each get? At what stage does an incoming member of the family take over? How is that person paid and treated in the interim? Do they have any say in how the business is run? Should the business be expanded, or should we consider value adding in order to accommodate the expanded family? All of these are topics so often swept under the rug until they erupt as major crises.

We have also learned that where feelings run high because of years of suppressed emotion it is important to use an outside facilitator rather than try to go it alone. Unfortunately in the typical situation, where "Dad" is accustomed to taking charge, this all-important meeting can be ruined if it is not handled carefully and without emotion. Families tend to be more pragmatic and less emotional when an outsider guides them through the process. Once the process is well understood, and has been practised a time or two, the need for a facilitator falls away.

I anticipate that the 'Sticky Sheet' process will be part of the curriculum on the short courses to be offered by the Brown/Gilpin team in conjunction with the CFU. If there is more than one family or one generation involved on your farm you ought to be a candidate. If you'd like more about those courses please e-mail me or contact my business administrator, Mrs Lorna Pearson, on 091/305-301.

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