

Facing the Family

An increasing amount of my recent work has involved assisting farming families to formulate succession plans. While there's been much written about structures and strategies, an area that many find difficult is getting around the table and sharing their hopes and frustrations so the plan can be based on credible information about everyone's goals and objectives.

The inter-play of family and business relationships naturally brings tensions. These are heightened by expectations and perceived obligations to deliver equity and fairness – especially to the senior generation who have done the hard yards and deserve the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their work.

So what have I learned about managing this process?

Get Time on Your Side

Addressing these issues early gives everyone time to think. An adverse health event or untimely death puts significant pressure on such a process. This is not an environment in which everyone will think rationally and clearly explain their expectations. Involving the family in regular consultation and communication promotes transparency and develops familiarity in dealing with these matters that builds a strong base for the future.

Open Hearts and Minds

Early in the process, I concentrate on opening the hearts and minds of the participants. This is about getting them to talk freely about their hopes and aspirations so there is a solid foundation for planning. This is not always easy where siblings have different agendas or parents and children may have competing expectations for each other. Regardless, a session that allows each party or family to speak without interruption on what they are hoping to achieve provides real resources on which to build.

My process is to commit this to writing and circulate it prior to a family meeting so everyone has the chance to think and reflect before discussing it further. That initial meeting is then designed to allow clarification and understanding so synergies are identified and areas of possible conflict earmarked for further evaluation.

This process provides an orderly approach to what can quickly become a disorderly discussion. It requires balanced facilitation and the process is certainly enhanced by independent input to ensure all views are aired.

Manage the Agenda

I have found with many of these meetings there is a risk you can let them go just 10 minutes too long. On many occasions we seem to have made excellent progress over a period of hours and then one party will make a statement that ignites debate, revisits issues already agreed or undermines the foundation built to date.

It's important such meetings do not attempt to cover too big an agenda. One meeting simply to establish goals and objectives is likely to be sufficient for the concentration span and conflict management that may be required. Pushing on from there to try and decide strategies and make decisions will possibly be too much for one day. Everyone needs a chance to regroup and review. A series of shorter discussions will be far more effective than one marathon effort.

Manage by Minutes

Accurate and timely minutes are taken and prepared for each meeting provide the bridge between each contact. Get minutes out early and invite attendees to make contact with any questions or concerns. If you can go into the next meeting with the minutes approved, you have a strong base on which to build.

It has been my honour to sit in on a number of these meetings and observe families making real watershed decisions. It's a great privilege to get follow-up phone calls that confirm what others thought was going to be a mountain that quickly turned into a molehill for everyone's security and satisfaction.

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