



Talking and listening on the farm is an essential ingredient to management success.

by *Kindra Gordon*

You've likely seen a ranch-related cartoon poking fun at two fenceposts talking to each other — neither of them is saying a word. Ron Hanson, University of Nebraska farm management specialist, has seen that same scenario among many a farm and ranch family — and it's no laughing matter.

To drive the point home, Hanson, who makes several motivational presentations to ag groups across the country each year, has titled one of them "Fenceposts Talking To Each Other." In this particular presentation, Hanson emphasizes that most family business disagreements are rooted in poor communication and are often the result of misunderstandings.

He says, "Sometimes rather simple misunderstandings cause

breakdowns in communication, especially during periods of stress." For instance, he says individuals get so wrapped up in their own individual problems they fail to communicate effectively with others. The result is that everyone is talking to one another, but no one is listening — which he likens to "talking to a fencepost."

Hanson says there can be many communication barriers

that prevent family members from communicating effectively with one another. Three of the most common communication complaints he hears include:

- He/she won't discuss his/her feelings with me.
- He/she tunes me out most of the time.
- He/she has time to talk to everyone but me.

Hanson says effective communication is a two-way street of talking and listening. He outlines some of the barriers to dealing with disagreements and skills for good listening.

Deal with disagreements

Hanson concedes that every family has its moments of disagreement, but he says it's not the disagreement that ruins a relationship. Instead, it is how that moment is handled.

He cites some unfair fighting tactics, such as:

- Refusing to admit a problem exists, or pretending there is no issue to deal with.
- Walking away from people or giving them the silent treatment.
- Storing up all your gripes and complaints and unloading them at once on your spouse or the rest of the family.
- Spending more time fighting or figuring out whom to blame

Learn to fight fairly

Disagreements are inevitable among families, says Ron Hanson with the University of Nebraska. But they don't have to tear a family apart. Here, he shares important strategies for fighting fair during a family disagreement:

- Learn to share feelings without blaming another family member.
- Don't expand the fight beyond the current problem at hand. Deal with one issue at a time.
- Avoid using statements like "You always" or "You never" when responding to someone in an argument. "You" is a blaming word. Instead, try to use statements with "I" in the conversation.
- Stop bringing up the same old problems. Resolve issues

and move forward. When a future issue comes up, don't revisit the past by bringing up previous arguments.

- Avoid name-calling or yelling.
- Be honest and stick to the facts of the situation.
- Keep family arguments private — never argue with a family member in public.
- Most importantly, remember to tell other family members "I'm sorry" and then show you mean it. Hanson says, "If you say the words, but nothing ever changes, that 'I'm sorry' means nothing — which hurts the other person even worse."

He concludes, "Behavior and actions have to change if you mean it." **HW**

instead of putting energy into finding a solution.

- Taking sides.
- Fighting about the same old problems and issues.

Instead, Hanson says, “The trick to improving family relationships is learning how to have your disagreements without being disagreeable.”

He adds, “Fairness is the key to solving any type of conflict. People don’t get upset or angry when they are treated fairly.”

Learn to listen

Hanson says one of the biggest misconceptions among farm families is that, “Talking means communicating.” But, he says, “If no one is actually listening to what you’re trying to share, then that conversation went nowhere.” This lack of listening, in turn, can lead to misunderstanding; and problems and/or conflict often surface as a result.

Thus, for effective communication and minimal misunderstandings, Hanson advocates that everyone needs to work at developing good listening skills. These include:

- Making a commitment of time and attention to the other person.
- Being sensitive to the feelings of others. This includes being attentive to people’s body language and changes in voice tone to understand how they might be feeling.
- Clearly understanding the situation or circumstances involved. Hanson suggests asking questions to help clarify the real issues involved.
- Having respect for the opinions of others. If people feel respect, they will trust you and share feelings, he says.

Hanson has developed a list of what he calls “10 skills for good listening between farm family members.” His checklist includes:

- Do not pass judgment (i.e. jump to conclusions) until you understand what the other person said.

More management advice

Radio and RFD-TV personality Orion Samuelson has built a lifelong career covering the agricultural sector. Samuelson’s advice to those who earn their livelihood from ag is to be more active in their industry — especially when it comes to political issues.

He says, “In ag today, with the diminishing number of people in food production, we need to be more actively involved in our industry. Pay attention to what’s going on around you.”

With the new Farm Bill being written, Samuelson says more than ever people not directly involved in production ag, such as PETA and the Sierra Club, want to have input. He says many of these groups claim they “must save the family farm,” but that these are the same organizations that will put rules and regulations in place that will make it financially impossible for the family farm to survive and do business.

Despite the challenges, Samuelson is optimistic about ag’s future. And to youth in 4-H, FFA and junior breed associations, he says, “You cannot dream big enough. There’s no way I envisioned my career.” He says that the new Farm Bill will likely include provisions to help young people start up in ag — which he says he is excited about.

Of the future, he again emphasizes that producers need to be politically active within their industry, and he concludes, “We are looking at better times. But if we don’t work to keep them, they’ll slip away.” **HW**

- Do not add viewpoints or change what the other person is communicating.
- Do not permit your attention to drift away while the other person is talking.
- Do not interrupt or change the subject.
- Do not close your mind.
- Do not finish for the other person.
- Do not permit wishful listening or “selective listening.”
- Do not rehearse your response — or build a rebuttal.
- Do not put the other person off by saying, “We’ll talk about it later,” because often you’ll avoid getting to that conversation.
- Don’t rush the other person with statements like “This better be quick; I’m in a hurry.”

Hanson says if you can follow these guidelines, you will be taking a big step toward showing respect and having meaningful conversations with one another. He emphasizes that you should never forget that families are very important.

“Every family has its moments but gain a proper perspective and focus on family strength in stressful times,” Hanson says. “The road to happiness always has detours. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may not come. The most important day is today and keep that in mind with your family.” **HW**

