

Communicating Across Generations

“Siri, do you speak 65-year-old?”

At a conference where I was speaking last spring, I met Kelsey, a recent college grad who had been back at her family’s California ranch about eight months. She was looking for help in navigating the waters of dealing with employees much older than she and told me about the day she literally collapsed at her desk in tears. Things had been bad for a while, but everything had come to a head when her dad yelled at her in front of two employees, saying she needed to have more control over “her people” if she was going to do this job right. Worst of all, one of the guys had been Tony, a long-term employee that Kelsey felt sure was trying to undermine her at every turn. She had been trying to tell her

dad about that concern — and that she needed some kind of help — when he’d blown up. Back at her office and at her wit’s end, she literally asked her phone’s voice activation assistant, “Siri, do you speak 65-year-old?”

Kelsey swore the answer came back: “No, I do not understand that.”

So, how do you help a young leader manage people who are older than she, who have had many more years of service and who have never reported to a girl (and don’t want to start)? Well, it’s not easy, but it starts by looking at the influence. One of the most critical aspects of influence involves clearly communicating value as well as expectations.

Communicating value

We have at least three (sometimes four, and soon we might have five) generations around our farm or ranch workplace! The question is how to get the different generations effectively communicating when there is a span of nearly a century between the 14-year-old grandson who thinks he would like to farm and the 90-something great-grandfather who still owns much of the land. It would probably be much easier if there was an app for communicating across generations.

The four big ways to communicate across generations

A few ways to encourage better communication with others and to develop an appreciation of the value they bring include:

1) Acknowledge and appreciate differences. (But, stop stereotyping!)

It can be easy to fall back on generational stereotypes when working across generations, which makes it particularly difficult to correct. However, in these situations, we have to pause and make an effort to avoid these limiting biases. We are all influenced by and, ultimately, are products of our time periods — when we were born, raised, became adults and gained our experiences. These experiences define who we are as individuals and are deeply ingrained in our personalities.

2) Understand value differences.

“Because it’s always been done that way” is the type of thinking that doesn’t resonate as a legitimate reason with anyone and, particularly, with people who are new to the business. While different generations may naturally value and prioritize different things, it’s valuable to have open discussions and explorations about the reasoning behind why things are done a certain way. Think of it this way: If someone younger questions you about the why of something and you can’t immediately explain it, then it is probably worth questioning.

3) Be willing to learn.

Younger generations need to be patient and willing to learn from experience. It turns out we actually don’t have all the answers just because we turned 21 or graduated from college. In turn, mature generations must have the willingness to teach rather than



to tell. Do you have an established system for knowledge transfer in your operation? If not, pairing a more senior, experienced employee with a junior person is the quintessentially classic way to mentor effectively and to give everyone a chance to shine.

4) Acknowledge differences with respect and expect respect.

Respect for others needs to be a clear expectation, and managers must set up systems to make this happen. The biggest challenges younger family members have when starting at the farm don’t usually involve working with parents and often long-term employees who might just be a tad set in their ways. Start by clear reporting structures, which can help prevent a host of avoidable problems. Also, it takes work and vigilance at all levels to ensure that a culture of respect is practiced. If you see older employees dissing a young manager, say something. Stepping in under these circumstances sends a message that disrespect will not be tolerated.

Finally, just as Kelsey eventually learned when she and her dad sat down to talk, communicating value is not just a “younger generation problem.” Every person must communicate the value he or she brings to the farm business and appreciate the value of others. All generations need to communicate their value in order to be heard, to be respected and to be effective. **HW**

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10 TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING ACROSS GENERATIONS

1. MATCH FORMALITY TO THE CULTURE
2. USE MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION AVENUES
3. INDIVIDUALIZE YOUR APPROACH
4. UNDERSTAND VALUE DIFFERENCES
5. BE AWARE OF MOTIVATING FACTORS
6. ASK, DON'T ASSUME
7. BE WILLING TO LEARN
8. BE WILLING TO TEACH
9. ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFERENCES
10. DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

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