

Where Coaching and Culture Coexist

Every business has a culture, as does every family. In agriculture, culture is not something we spend much time talking about, but we should. While it is hard to define, culture exists, and is felt by everyone. What is most interesting about culture is that it is either created or simply tolerated.

Culture is always shifting, too — when new leaders take the helm or when the matriarch of the family passes away. Often, these events have to occur before we see a change in culture, but culture can be changed intentionally, and it often should be. Let me relate a story that may sound familiar to some of you.

Tom and Bob had taken over the majority of Dad’s leadership, yet not long into this change, Dad inserted his will by demanding they hire Jim, their new brother-in-law. While Tom and Bob were angry, they did not dare talk to Dad about it, as Dad still “ruled.”

Things started badly and became worse. Jim was not exactly a great fit for his new role, and Tom was not exactly hiding his view of that situation. Everyone tolerated

Dad’s decision — until they could not anymore.

Instead of talking through a solution, Tom ignored Jim as much as possible. By the time I met the family, Bob had been protecting Jim from Tom and Tom from Jim for months, tiptoeing around the two. They were tolerating the culture of Tom’s anger at the situation and Jim’s very real incompetence at the job he had been assigned. Sadly, the very culture Tom hated — the way his Dad ruled from a place of anger and demanding silence — was the same way he was acting. The culture they tolerated seemed likely to continue.

Make no mistake. A culture people believe in, flourish in and love is essential for the long-term health of a farm. A culture of coaching and learning is about creating shared visions over time.

Connectedness and coaching

Connectedness is tough to foster, but for leaders, it is part of the job. Process and structure can make things easier and make for good order. It is imperative to create frameworks

that allow individuals the freedom to lead and to work. Every leader can and must learn to coach employees. Although it is challenging to devote hours to working on the business when the workforce is tight, the margins are slim, or when you’re just too dang busy with spring calving, being a good coach takes practice and attention.

Now, young agricultural producers must take on more expansive roles than their farming forbearers. These include marketing, personnel management and working with consumers. Successful farms recognize this shift and are addressing these challenges.

Train, don’t tell

The old way of telling and expecting an instant result can be replaced through a training approach or by partnering with the younger generation to coach them through scenarios to steadily improve necessary skills. One of the best ways to mentor younger generations is to pair a less experienced person with a more seasoned person.

Bob, Tom and even Jim were dealt a situation of having to coexist in a culture that had been allowed, not created. Ultimately (with a little outside help to get them talking), they decided to change the culture for good and worked to emphasize connectedness and to create a new culture for success. Brother-in-law Jim left the farm to attend a trade school to get the training to be a good asset to the business. After apprenticing in a mechanical shop for a year during and after school, it was Tom, Jim’s one-time nemesis, who hired him back. Tom came to realize Jim could bring real value to the farm, he just needed the training.

As a leader it is our role to foster a culture of coaching and mentoring in a planned, focused way to provide lasting benefits for everyone. **HW**

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Comparison of coaching and mentoring approaches

What is coaching?	What is mentoring?
Short-term or for a defined period of time.	Often long-term and ongoing.
Performance-based and must be measurable.	Nurturing approach that, at times, forgives lack of performance.
Seeks to enable a concrete, new decision or change, or aims to develop or hone a skill.	Provides moral support and not as much training.
Must include progress check-ins, often with a report to a supervisor.	Does not require formal reporting or timely check-in, may have few meetings.
A formal process with defined intervals or start/stop times.	Informal with no process and no determined length of engagement time.
Provides accountability to guide/develop skills or behavior.	Provides a sounding board without defined accountability expectations.
Can be fee-based or, at least, includes a connection to a performance review.	Free and doesn’t require a penalty or provide a bonus for outcomes.
Used in intentional, professional relationships to achieve a desired result.	Often based on personal, friendly relationships that provide support.
Age of coach or age difference between coach and coachee not relevant.	Frequently an age difference exists with the mentor being more seasoned and has experienced the situation of the mentee.
Coach is a supervisor seeking performance improvement from an employee or a paid professional seeking financial compensation.	Mentor is often seeking a mutually gratifying opportunity to give back.