

## Women in Agriculture, in Your Operation

Last issue, I wrote about building your bench by analyzing your talent pipeline, and there is no better time than early summer to consider what that looks like for your ranch or farm business. This season brings graduations and, along with those, a host of newly minted young people with education, enthusiasm and fresh ideas. Do you have new hires coming to your barn? If you plan to in the near future, I believe that those candidates will look a whole lot more feminine than ever before.

### Why farming will have more women CEOs

I have a strong belief that the agricultural “C-suite” at the farm level will look a whole lot different in a generation or less. I fully expect more women not only to end up being farm CEOs but also to garner the top seats at many large agribusinesses, as well. Here’s why.

**Level of education:** That math is there; more women graduate from college today than men, and many colleges of agriculture are experiencing a massive shift toward women in both enrollment and graduation for nearly all agricultural degree programs. Visit any college ag campus, and you will see what I mean. Young women are involved in leadership roles at an early age in agriculture, as well. In my home state of Indiana, for example, for the entirety of the 2010s, nearly every state FFA president was female.

Secondary schools are also doing a better job of encouraging young women to consider the sciences, which is great for us in the livestock industry! There is a trend at the college level to bring more young women into STEM-oriented majors and to expose them to science-related career options. Melissa Korn, writing for *WSJ.com* reports that “women as a share of STEM-degree recipients at the bachelor’s level and above increased at nine of the 10 largest such programs between 2012 and 2016.” That’s a fast advance, especially considering that Korn goes on to write “Six of these programs

now award at least one-third of those degrees (STEM-related) to women.”

Agriculture needs educated young people with engineering, coding, programming, science and math skills. But it will have to fight to get these women to come back to the farm because there are plenty of attractive places for them to work. Which leads me to my next point...

**Quality of life and professional balance:** I speak with a lot of young women who plan to return to the rural area where they grew up, even if it’s not to go back to the farm. Reasons range from proximity to family to their enjoyment of the way of life and even because of the lower cost of living. Yet, most of these women still aim for a career. With essential advances in technology, such as high-speed internet access, rural areas will increasingly have the needed bandwidth to provide more options.

Educated young women today seek a balance of career and family and don’t necessarily believe that an hour commute to work each day is worthwhile. Being groomed to lead the farming operation may give them the opportunity to balance family with professional skills and career aspirations. This is a tremendous advantage to the successful transition of family business.

**Fewer (traditional) blind spots (and great at merchandising!)** A female expert in grain marketing is fond of saying she prefers to deal with women because they tend to be less close to the “bushel babies” and are less emotional about pulling the trigger on marketing decisions than the guys. Scientific? No. But what she means is that for many men who have traditionally handled the day-to-day planting and harvesting work, it can be challenging to loosen the tie between what the crop looks like and what the market says it will pay. The ability to see the operation from a different background will be helpful to farms of the (near) future.

**Advocacy and relationships:** I use the Clifton Strengths assessment when coaching clients and organizations through change. One of the four quadrants of leadership my team and I discuss is about influence—or rather, not just the ability but the desire to influence others. In agriculture, I find this category has the fewest people with strengths — among my male clients, that is.

Again, just my own research, but women in agriculture tend to possess more strengths in areas like advocacy, relationship building and the need to be inclusive of others compared with men. Influence is about a variety of things, including the ability to bridge philosophical gaps and to negotiate effectively. Today that is already important, and going forward, it’s mission critical. The ability to negotiate and to advocate on behalf of the operation in a way that non-ag landowners and consumers can relate to will be a matter of life or death for farms. Your operation needs someone with strong empathy and relational tendencies.

### What do you want in a successor?

So, as you plan for that new talent acquisition, it’s helpful to think ahead. Think about this: What does the “new you” look like? What does he or she need to know to be successful? Considering what you believe is needed in a successor requires taking a candid look at what you have now and the people you have coming up — what you have in the pipeline. It’s about identifying the skills needed that you don’t possess and aren’t likely to gain and giving those leaders time to hone them. It’s also about making smart, educated choices and not overlooking the forest for the trees. For many the future leadership at your farm or ranch just may be a whole lot more feminine than you think. And that’s a great thing for your future. **HW**

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