

Developing and Coaching Your Next Generation

Young producers share how they returned to the farm.

If you are wondering how best to incorporate young people into your farming operation, well, just ask them! I had the opportunity to do so during an online conference of top producers. I moderated a discussion with young farmers, including Zoey Brooks of Waupaca, Wis.; Clayton Phelps of Groveland, N.Y.; and Julie Linder of Norwalk, Ohio. These three captivated the audience with their take on coaching, training and onboarding.

Does off-farm professional work add value?

Should you work off the farm first? This common question asked by parents of young, will-be farmers is on the younger generation's mind, too. Panelists had different routes back to the farm, but they agree off-farm professional experience adds value and personal growth.

Linder now works for her dad, but her background is in the medical field. She found her science-based training relevant to her work with soil sampling and data collection. "It's been really transferrable, and I like science so the work I do now makes sense," she says.

Linder did not have an agriculture background. When she was young, her dad primarily ran a construction company that allowed him to finance a foray into farming. "I understood heavy equipment and seasons, and working with that has been important, too," Linder adds.

After college, Brooks spent a year with the Wisconsin dairy industry as "Alice in Dairy Land," a year-long program promoting dairy. From there, she planned on veterinary school. Her plans changed when they started construction on a new facility on her home farm. Conversations with

her family led her to managing the construction of the facility and now operating it.

Phelps and his dad created a five-year plan for his eventual return to the operation, but circumstances shortened their time frame. Phelps still had a formal interview with his dad and other stakeholders. "It was pretty weird doing a job interview in the living room, but it was a good process to get everything on the table," he says.

Onboarding process

The group agrees their onboarding went relatively well — partly due to the fact they filled a need in their respective operations. Panelists shared common ways to improve the process.

For example, Brooks took it upon herself to improve how new hires were brought into the dairy. "Dad didn't like to do this part as much," she laughs. "We needed to help new people with more training than just a day."

Brooks revised hiring and training. She works directly with new hires, so they are all trained similarly.

Phelps thought his operation was devoid of clear role definitions. Now, he adds those to onboarding when he hires. "We needed job descriptions, and that's something I think we've gotten better at since I've been back."

Meetings and feedback

Giving and receiving constructive feedback is the foundation of any working relationship. We know that can be difficult with family. These young farmers shared a common emphasis on communication.

Phelps says he and his dad meet annually to map out goals. This process has improved discussions and accountability with other father-son operations in his peer network.

Linder believes demonstrating value helps others become comfortable with your presence. "I'm like one of the guys, but I think they respect me and what I do," she says. Linder created more detailed notes for each season, supplementing the data she collects on fertility and weather. She and her dad use it to review the year and plan for the next.

Brooks' biggest feedback came when her dad told her never to refer her employees back to him. "He said, 'Even if you don't know what to do and need my help... tell them you'll get back to them with the answer,'" she says. "It's important employees know they can come to me, and I'll get the answers."

The money game — ante up or not?

Family members often struggle structuring ownership and compensation.

"Motivation for me to do my job and do it well is not about money or owning a piece right now," Linder shares.

Brooks and her family took a different approach, and she has a financial stake in the new building from the start. Brooks believes it is an important way to differentiate her from other siblings who do not farm.

The panelists were clear that a one-size approach does not fit all, but a structured process where they have input fosters young farmers' growth. Most importantly, senior members need to have a plan and a purpose for new roles and to let the younger generation have an opportunity to lead. **HW**

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