

Graduation Season

Consider coming home to the farm.

Let's start with a provocative question: When do you want to be out of a job?

Have you set your exit goals?

While some days you may feel ready to throw in the proverbial towel, planning your exit likely feels difficult to consider, much less execute.

However, there are several questions to ask yourself:

- How do you want to leave farming?
- Do you know who will manage your operation in two, five or 10 years?
- Are they prepared? If not, what conscious effort is being made to get them prepared?
- Are they working in the business now? If not, is there a track to get them there?
- If you are on the younger side of 40, how are you being groomed and educated to lead the farm for another generation?
- What is being done to develop and coach the emerging leaders for your business?

For many in production agriculture, there is a younger generation willing to come back. Yet, working that ambitious, energetic individual into the business should be thoughtful, and frankly, not automatic. Here are a few thoughts on ways to do that well.

No. 1: Work away before coming back

A big question on the minds of farmers with young, college-age leaders relates to working off the farm before coming home. Off-farm opportunities may occur during college or may consist of taking a few seasons after college to work full time somewhere completely different. Does off-farm professional

work add value? Should family members be required to work off the farm before coming back full time? I recently moderated a panel with three farmers under the age of 40, all of whom worked off the farm first. When asked this question, their resounding answer was, "Yes."

One panelist said her science degree and nearly 10 years in the medical field were excellent preparation for the work she now does handling soil testing and other agronomic details for the farm. Another producer only spent one year away from the operation after college, but it was in a marketing role. This experience was beneficial when the operation expanded, and she found herself handling the zoning, media and local relations concerning their livestock expansion.

No. 2: What if they want to come back before we planned?

Times change, roles shift and emergencies happen. And sometimes, young professionals realize that life was not greener on the other side of the fence. Even if you have decided to have Junior work off the farm for a few years, what if the return time changes?

The third panelist and his dad had proactively planned for his return and had built a five-year timeline. However, at year three, Dad found himself without a row-crop manager. After careful consideration, including consulting with their peer group, the father and son agreed that the timing was right for his return to the farming operation. "It turned out we were really looking for the same thing," the panelist shared.

The most important thing for any operation is to be ready to address this issue. Build a family

employment policy now. Then, if you are considering hiring someone in a way that goes against the policy you created, ask yourself why. Is there a truly viable reason beyond the emotional or family pressures you may be facing?

No. 3: Do an interview

"Dear, Dad's over a 'certain age', I know there was no such thing as an interview when we joined the farm, but..."

Another way to manage and integrate returning family is through a job interview. The panelists I mentioned all interviewed before they came on board. These millennial leaders agreed that a formal interview is important, even for family members — maybe even especially for family members.

Consider inviting some stakeholders or trusted advisors to participate in the interview process, especially if you do not have multiple layers of other management. They might not make the final decision, but they may be able to provide candid and valuable commentary on blind spots (both positive and negative) that parents can have when seeing their child as an employee.

If we acknowledge that the operation is going to look different going forward and will require more professionalism, then the onboarding process must be handled differently than it was a generation ago. Take time to thoughtfully consider how to bring on your next generation. **HW**

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