

## Multi-generation Communication

The second story in a series about communicating across generations.



Photo by Kelsey Decker

Based on last month's tips, I hope you are leaving the summer season behind a bit more mindful about those from different generations on your farm or ranch operation. Still working on it? Not a problem, here are two more tips and a tale for September.

- Be willing to learn.
- Acknowledge difference with respect and also expect respect.

### **Be willing to learn, listen and teach (not tell)**

Younger generations need to be patient and willing to learn from experience. As it turns out, we don't have all the answers just because we turned 21 or graduated from college. But, in turn, mature generations must have the willingness to teach rather than tell. If you've ever been young and lectured by your dad while doing chores (wrong, of course), you know what I'm talking about.

Let's get more specific. Do you have an established system for knowledge transfer in your operation? Pairing a more senior, experienced

employee with a junior person is the quintessentially classic way to mentor effectively and give everyone a chance to shine.

### **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 usually don't involve working with Dad, Grandpa or even Mom. It's more typical that they will struggle when working with long-term employees who are often like family, but not related.

We have at least three (sometimes four, and soon we might have five) generations around our farm 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 granddaughter who thinks she'd like to farm and the 90-something father who still owns much of the land.

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While part of this involves negotiating skills, it's really about communicating value. What does each person bring to the farm? Recognizing the specific value each member brings to the operation will be essential for this next generation of leaders to understand and manage if they want to succeed.

The Baby Boomer generation has begun to retire from the workforce, and the Gen Xers have begun or will be moving into the most senior roles. Now, Millennials and even Gen Z, those born after 1996, are large parts of the farm workforce, too. Building a work culture that finds common ground among these generations and serves all of them is crucial to creating a workplace that attracts, inspires and retains top talent.

It takes work and vigilance at all levels to ensure a culture of respect. Treating others with respect is the best way to establish that culture. Additionally, 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. Respect goes both ways, and it is earned both ways, too. **HW**

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