

Developing Leaders

Invest in future leaders for your farm's future.

Leadership — without it, what does the future of your operation look like?

Investing in leaders now is a critical part of your farm's next generation. Follow our five steps to develop and coach your next leader (see sidebar).

Words from wise women

The best way to benefit from the five-step model is through collaboration. I recently had the pleasure of attending the 2023 Top Producer Summit and leading the Executive Women in Agriculture (EWA) session. During this session, a panel of three women shared how they are taking their operations to the next level through leadership and collaboration. These women had different perspectives and roles, but all were inspiring and innovative.

Susan Weaver Ford, the first female operator on her family's

sixth-generation tobacco farm in North Carolina spoke about her many travels as one of 10 Americans selected to be a part of the Nuffield International Farming Scholars. This group provides female farmers the opportunity to travel, learn and collaborate with other female farmers around the world.

"I travel the world and always try to bring something back to implement on my own farm," Ford says.

Talk about building influence! The only thing more important than Ford's farm operation is her family. As she spoke about her 12- and 6-year-old kids showing interest in the farm, it rang true that developing a powerful, professional network and influencing others is the key to leadership and seeing your operation grow for the future.

Chiming in to validate Ford's points was Emily Malecha. Marrying into a large family farm, Malecha moved into a leadership role for marketing, office management and hiring H-2A employees. Together, the Malecha family tackles their operation with a business-minded approach. Through business advisors and literal unanimous family votes around a table, Malecha explained that everything they do isn't just for the present. They are collectively building a legacy for their next generation.

Jennie Schmidt offered a unique perspective. The registered dietitian turned farmer is running a grape, soybean, corn and green bean operation with her brother-in-law in Maryland. With an ever-changing market, unusual geography and more restrictive state regulations, Schmidt found herself pivoting to new ventures and diversifying her portfolio in order to achieve goals and stay relevant in the area.

"Never growing up around farming, I made myself indispensable by learning to drive every piece of equipment," Schmidt says. Whether she was switching gears from growing tomatoes to tofu soybeans or starting her own vineyard consulting business, neither Schmidt nor any of these panelists failed to develop accountability as a leader or implement their processes for their operations.

Leadership — without it, what does the future of your operation look like? Whether you answer this question with a positive or a negative, these five steps and words from three wise, top-producing women will help pave the way to start building leaders today and for the next generation. **HW**

Sarah Beth Aubrey is an entrepreneur and founder of Aubrey Coaching and Training (ACT). She can be reached at sarah@sarabhethaubrey.com.

Five Steps to Develop the Next Generation

Step 1: Start with why.

Be clear about your "why." Then, it's much easier to outline a vision and strategy that includes a set of goals for this process.

Step 2: Take inventory.

Create your human asset state-of-the-state. How can employees become better prepared to lead? How much time is spent identifying critical topics for knowledge transfer and taking action?

Step 3: Cultivate culture.

The idea of coaching — beyond the sports field — is fairly unfamiliar to most people in agriculture. But it can't be the case any longer.

Step 4: Build influence.

The overall theme is about building a powerhouse professional network. Consider training, education, peer groups and advisory boards, to gain experience, and develop advocacy and communications skills.

Step 5: Step Five: Develop accountability.

No successful process is ever complete without implementation, and remember it's a joint effort. Build accountability systems (like performance metrics and personnel reviews). **HW**