FARMING FAMILIES: THREE THINGS TO THRASH OUT WITH YOUR IN-LAWS

by Brigid Price | May 24, 2017 | Farmers' Voice, Succession Planning

Marrying anyone is life changing. Marry a farmer, you enter a whole new world where your in-laws are often your boss, and you're sleeping with your business partner…many awkward conversations often result.

There is a reason most people in smaller towns are related. Years ago, no-one had to venture very far to find their life partner. Oh, how times have changed.

These days, young people are encouraged to move away from home to attend college, travel, do a stint up north, learn a trade or experience life working for someone else.

THE CHILDREN RETURN HOME

But at some point, they return. Often, they come with new ideas, new ways of doing things and occasionally, a new partner.

There is a high possibility the new partner has a tertiary education and has been in the job market earning a good wage for many years. That person has skills and expertise to add value to the family and business.

Most families are not prepared for how this plays out in terms of succession, or how the new partner fits in with the business. For some reason, the uncomfortable conversations are ignored and never happen.

Or…the new couple talk but the discussions go no further.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

When you join a family who farm you become part of a family business.

Depending on the level of preparation, the reality of life on the land can be a rude shock. The work days are long, you are alone a lot, housework is not evenly shared, commitments are often broken, the job is your partner's life, and a good sense of humour is essential.

TRADITIONS RUN DEEP ON THE LAND

Quite often roles are traditional. While male farmers can wash, iron, cook and clean, they simply don't have the time. Working out the roles in a marriage is one thing, but finding your identity in a new family can be overwhelming.

There are three key things farming families should address when a new partner is introduced to the business…

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Everyone who marries a farmer becomes one themselves. They may work part-time, casually or full-time (as in 70 plus hours a week). The apprenticeship may be short or take years to complete. The job is hands on or more of a supporting role.

The level of involvement is not the point. Individuals need to be encouraged to show up each day and be part of the business. Confidence comes from encouragement, experience and self-belief. Everyone should feel in control of their life.

Many issues arise because farming families don't have processes to welcome new members or explain how things operate. Without a transparent set of rules, it is often hard to understand why things are the way they are. There is nothing worse than feeling like the goalposts keep being shifted.

Large corporations have policies and procedures for their staff. Larger agricultural companies have human resource departments to look after the needs of the employees. Given the value of assets involved in a family agribusiness, it pays to take the time to develop policies and procedures for houses, holidays, dispute processes, and remuneration.

Working conditions, pay rates and terms of employment are standard for new employees to be told about. Agricultural businesses should be no different. Remember, new partners represent the future of the family and the business.

THE FINANCIAL SIDE OF THINGS

For partners who cannot earn off-farm income, their cash flow and ability to spend money is effectively controlled by the decision-makers within the family. Every person counts, every job matters, every contribution should be recognised.

There needs to be conversations around the operational side of the business – too much is left unsaid causing unnecessary hurt and frustration.

Bringing new family members into the business is going to happen. When a sibling marries, or enters a long-term relationship, the dynamics change. Ideally a family business will have planned for this outcome. Those that have nothing pre-planned still have an opportunity to create a welcoming environment.

Put yourself in the new person's shoes. The family business needs to be able to proactively manage the situation. It costs money to live.

FAMILY RULES AND EXPECTATIONS

Australian agricultural families build legacies. The greatest financial asset is the land. But people need money to pay bills. A business may be in a growth phase, focusing on debt reduction or trading their way through a drought. Transparency of communication will help all the individuals take ownership and commit to the overall goal.

It is hard to work for something when you don't feel you are part of it. Successful farming families involve all members in the business sharing vision, goals and what their role is.

There are a range of resources in the **RURAL WISDOM** membership area to help families document their vision, family rules, business procedures and policies.

https://www.ruralresources.com.au/farming-families-three-things-to-thrash-out-with-your-in-laws/