

FARM TRANSITION | SUPPORT

Wading into troubled waters Manitoba counsellor's expertise

Communication paves way | Farm succession coach helps family members discuss issues and solve conflicts to enable a successful transition

BY ED WHITE
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Most people run away from tales of other families' strained personal relationships.

And few people would want to delve into the problematic interpersonal relationships and "no go zones" of other families, especially in the presence of family members.

But Elaine Froese repeatedly strides into this awkward, challenging and touchy area and loves doing it, even when she's forcing people to talk about things they'd rather leave unsaid.

"I feel called to do this," said Froese, a family dynamics and farm succession coach, author and newspaper columnist from Boissevain, Man.

"I'm not going out to have tea. I'm going out to help them talk about their tough issues and find a way to create the life they've always wanted."

Froese has been working as a coach since 2003 and through her work with individual families and at workshops and conferences, she has compiled experiences that she has packaged in her books *Do the Tough Things Right* and *Planting the Seed of Hope*.

Her most rewarding work is one-on-one sessions with farm families dealing with succession and other central farm business planning issues.

"I love what I do," she said, noting her own personal and family struggles over the years.



Elaine Froese helps farm families discuss issues relating to farm succession planning. | KIM PENNER, KIMAGE PHOTOGRAPHY, PHOTO

They have included her post-partum depression, the sudden cancellation of the adoption of a baby, the death of a sister to a drunk driver and the unexpected death of her mother due to an asthma attack, and have made her more willing to tread far into others' problems.

"All the loss I've experienced in my life, and how I've dealt with that loss, has given me huge empathy and compassion," she said. "I've had to sit through those tough issues myself."

Farm succession counselling is not

a quick-turnaround business.

She said she often gets the first call from a family member, often the main farmer's wife, about two years before both of the couple or the rest of the family agrees to sit down with her.

"The call finally comes in, now we're ready," she said.

"I can wait. I'm only 55. I've got 20 years left in me."

Froese, either at the family farm or more likely at an apartment in Boissevain that she has set up, sits down

with the family and tries to see what's going on.

"I'm trying to nail down their key challenges," she said.

She then assesses the "undiscussable cards," which include fairness, fighting, family dynamics, forgiveness and respect.

Her main challenge is to get family members talking openly.

"Unless you start with conflict resolution and communication as the foundation, everything else is going to be on wobbly ground."

Froese said conflicts between older and younger generations on farms are becoming more general because younger people have grown up in a culture that encourages communication in sharp contrast to the older generations.

Without a free flow of viewpoints, many farms amass piles of misunderstandings and frustrations.

Father-son conflicts are common, but with more women becoming involved with farming, father-daughter conflicts are also increasing.

"These daughters are frustrated because their fathers and mothers don't have a system for understanding where they're coming from," said Froese.

Dealing with the unspoken anxieties of aging fathers involves resolving fears of the dreaded "R" word: retirement.

Many older farmers think they will lose their identity and what they love doing if they back away from control. Froese tries to get them to focus on their changing roles.

"He's not retiring, but his role is going to shift," said Froese. "Only 30 percent of farmers ever fully retire."

The work Froese does with families is demanding, expensive and time-consuming, but she has no fear it will go away. With many farmer retirements pending, sorting out the family dynamics of an entire generation of farmers should keep her busy, she said.

"I'm never going to be out of work."



PASSING THE TORCH:
THE SUCCESSION
PLANNING PROCESS

The business succession process involves the following stages:

- determine whether succession is a viable alternative (are children interested and capable of running the farm?)
- develop a succession plan
- monitor the implementation of the plan and make changes as necessary
- co-ordinate succession plan with personal tax planning for retirement and distribution of estate

Succession plan development and implementation:

If family succession makes sense, the next step is to develop a plan. Steps common to most successful plans:

- identify your successor and his or her role
- transition your successor aboard
- keep the succession plan as open as possible
- establish a clear timetable for the process
- develop a business plan that extends beyond your retirement
- seek outside advice
- retain key non-family employees
- realize that fairness is not synonymous with equality

Preparing your successor:

To make sure the successor will be ready to take control when the time comes:

- allow successor to participate in business decisions, passing on more responsibility as time passes.
- allow successor to work in different areas of the business.
- gradually allow successor to assume your duties

Source: BDO Canada