

Book helps farm families facing in-law issues

Conflicts that arise are often ignored, leading to serious problems down the road, authors say

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Elaine Froese, a farm family coach in Boissevain, Manitoba had seen and heard it all too many times.

Mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws who weren't on speaking terms. Daughter-in-laws who felt like they had no voice. Fathers who said they couldn't understand the younger generation.

There was a reoccurring theme that was not being addressed on family farms.

"The people element is the most overlooked piece of the family farm," says Froese. "Successful farms are made up of more than just money, land and equipment."

Froese couldn't find anything that had been written on the impacts of in-laws on the dynamics in farm families and succession planning. She

teamed up with Megan McKenzie, also from Boissevain, who has a PhD in Peace Studies, to write the book, 'Farming's In-Law Factor – How to have more harmony and less conflict on family farms'.

The biggest issue is that there is too much conflict avoidance, explains Froese. "Communication has been shut down."

On many farms, conflict is avoided at all costs but denying the conflict may make the situation worse if it needs to be addressed, says Froese. "It hides the conflict and impedes a resolution. Like a wound that needs to be drained, the conflict festers under the surface."

"Often the only thing that flourishes on perpetually avoidant farms are grudges, hostility, and divorces," she continues.

Unfortunately the stakes are high. Poor communication can lead to the breakdown of the family and the failure of the farm business.

"When fighting takes precedence, the family and farm are

destroyed," says Froese. There are missed opportunities, family members stop speaking to each other and couples end up in the divorce courts, she explains.

It doesn't have to be that way. "Conflict can be an opportunity for change and new beginnings," says Froese. "You need to learn to deal with it in a healthy way," she explains.

The book by Froese and McKenzie will help farm families become more aware of the issues and offers concrete tools to help people. It's also peppered with cartoons and stories to make it an easy and enjoyable read.

ONE PIECE of advice that Froese and McKenzie have for all family members is to become more self-aware. Why do we do the things we do?

By exploring unspoken norms, expectations and roles in your family and on your farm, many things become a lot clearer for you and your in-laws.

This can be particularly help-

ful when a son or daughter marries a spouse who is from the city. A father-in-law or mother-in-law may be wondering why their urban daughter-in-law or son-in-law doesn't do things the way they do.

"We often do things just because it's the way we always have, without being conscious of it," write the book's authors. "We need to be aware that the rest of the world doesn't necessarily see everything the way we do."

"Different isn't wrong, it's just different," emphasizes Froese.

Even when everyone was raised on the farm, every family has its own sub-culture, value systems and expectations for behavior. For example, there may be differences of opinion on how children should be raised, how holidays are celebrated or how conflict is dealt with.

In order to address the effects of unspoken norms, they need to be identified and named, writes

McKenzie. Few things cause more conflict than disagreements over spending money, taking on debt or dealing with cash flow, she adds.

A successful marriage requires the creation of a new family unit which means merging each spouse's ideas about family. "Together you must create a family culture that works for the couple," explains McKenzie.

There's a chapter 'The Big Red Toolbox for Action' that gets specific on how to improve communication. One tool is to hold a regular Family Council Meetings which involve all of the farming and non-farming family members. "It's a time to meet, listen, and understand one another."

A second type of meeting that the farm team needs is a Farm Business Meeting. This is where day-to-day operational issues, succession planning and legal and accounting concerns are discussed.

Meeting is not a waste of time, says Froese. On the contrary, Dr. David Kohl of Virginia Tech University found that farms that had regular farm business meetings were 21% more profitable.

And in the event that harmony on the farm can't be achieved, Froese and McKenzie also include a chapter with suggestions for "What to do when it doesn't work out."


If you'd like to get along with your in-laws or other family members better, this book gives you the tools to understand the issues, improve communication, reduce conflict and have healthier relationships.

Farming's In-Law Factor is available as a print book for \$30 plus shipping and handling or as an e-book for \$10 at <http://www.elainefroese.com/store/farmings-in-law-factor>.

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