

## **Conflict Management**

Conflict occurs when people have actual or perceived, opposing ideas, needs, values or wishes. It is impossible for two or more people who have their own ideas, needs, values and wishes to live and work together without any conflict. It is a normal part of human interaction. The opportunity for conflict continues to grow as people spend more time together and as more decisions are made that affect each party.

Conflicts that arise within a farm family often take on a deeper meaning. When family members have disputes about business issues, usually more than just a business decision is at stake. The people involved often bring with them a history of expectations, assumptions and old hurts.

### **Why is this relevant?**

Though we may all experience conflict, it is the management of conflict within a family that enables us to maintain positive relationships and achieve farm business success.

### **How will this help transition planning?**

- Having all family members read about and discuss conflict management can help to avoid conflict.
- Constructively and proactively dealing with conflict can be a positive experience.
- Constructively and proactively dealing with conflict can bring energy and confidence to the transition planning process.

### **Instructions**

1. Read the information on conflict management that is provided in the forms appendix on pages 253-255. You'll see that it's separated into the following categories:
  - sources of conflict,
  - conflict management styles
  - strategies to find win-win solutions
2. Discuss among family members at the next transition planning meeting.
3. Determine what will happen if conflict becomes an issue or may become an issue. It is much easier to figure out what to do about conflict before it appears.
4. Discuss whether or not you will use an external facilitator to assist where family members are concerned that the potential for conflict exists.

## How does this apply?

As your family continues to work through the transition planning exercise:

- Be aware of the sources of conflict that could be applicable to your situation.
- Be aware of your own particular conflict management style and how this style affects resolving the conflict at hand.
- If you do encounter conflict in your discussions, refer to and apply the strategies to find win-win solutions.



### PLANNING POINTERS:

- Family members actively involved in the business should complete the exercise.
- Family members who might be actively involved in the business at some point in the future should complete the exercise.
- Family members who are not currently actively involved, or who are **not** planning on being actively involved in the business, can optionally be included in the exercise.



### WHAT TO WATCH FOR:

- Consider using an external facilitator if you are concerned about some potential for conflict during the discussion.
- Not all conflict is bad. Conflict can be a positive experience when it leads to creative ways of finding solutions to what caused the conflict.
- Conflict is often unresolved. There is no perfect solution to deal with unresolved conflict. Sweeping unresolved conflict under the carpet is often not the best choice in dealing with it.



**EXERCISE:** Go to the forms appendix at the back of this guide for blank copy of the Conflict Management information on pages 253-255.

## Next steps

Congratulations on completing this topic. You are now a step closer to having a transition plan for your farm. Please proceed to the next topic area on your Transition Plan, but don't forget to add any assigned tasks that were generated by working through this topic.

# Conflict Management

## Sources of Conflict

### *Authority, control, power:*

The struggle for power can affect every situation and decision related to the farm operation. Farm families generally prize the value of independence and freedom to operate their own enterprise, yet many times, children are controlled well into adulthood by the parents.

### *Division of income:*

The question of when the younger generation gets a greater share of the farm income is a chronic point of disagreement.

### *Obligations and indebtedness:*

Who bears the brunt of risks in the business? Does someone feel taken advantage of? Is there someone who is not carrying their weight, yet getting paid as if they are (or vice versa)?

### *In-law relations and conflict of loyalties:*

Many times the in-laws are never quite included in the family circle. Family loyalties get tangled when conflict occurs.

### *Differences in risk taking:*

Each person has their own set of values and goals that affect how and when they spend money and how they make decisions. If differences are not tolerated, conflict can arise.

### *Decision making:*

The need for crucial and frequent decisions to be made, often with little time to gather all the facts, contributes to conflicts. Who makes most of the decisions? Who is blamed if decisions turn out to be poor ones?

### *Legal transfer of the property:*

Of course, the transfer of property from one generation to the next is another issue that can create tension and conflict. Some members may believe that legal agreements are all that are needed to solve the problem. Other family members may feel that more communication, mutual understanding and tolerance are needed to fully deal with the issues.

## Conflict Management Styles

The ability to cope successfully with conflict is an important skill for all family members to have. There is no perfect way to handle all conflicts and there are several methods or styles that work well. Which one is appropriate or successful will depend on the situation and the people involved.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann developed a conflict management framework. It includes five styles for handling conflict.

The five styles are described as follows:

*Avoidance:*

You do not pursue your own concerns or the others' concerns. This usually results in a lose-lose situation.

*Accommodation:*

You have a high concern for others' needs and neglect your own concerns in order to satisfy their needs. Here you lose; the other person wins. This is a lose-win solution.

*Competition:*

You are concerned only with your own interests and pursue them at the expense of others. Here you win but the other person loses. This is a win-lose situation.

*Compromise:*

You are equally concerned with your needs and others' needs. Compromise never fully takes care of anyone's needs. This is a no win-no lose solution.

*Collaboration:*

You have high concern for both your needs and others' needs. Using this style, you work with the other person or people to find a solution, which is acceptable to all. This is a win-win solution.

No single style is necessarily better than the others given particular circumstances. However, collaboration and, to a lesser extent, compromise are considered to be the most constructive methods of conflict resolution.

## **Strategies to Find Win-Win Solutions**

Specific strategies can be used to help arrive at win-win solutions to conflicts. Try the following:

*Establish shared goals:*

To create a climate of collaboration, people need to focus on what they share in common. Two brothers arguing over specific production methods could start by agreeing that they both share the goal of increasing productivity.

*Separate the people from the problem:*

Focus on the problem to be solved, not on the personality traits of the people involved. Telling someone an idea is stupid is less damaging than telling them they are stupid.

*Focus on interests, not positions:*

Positions are demands the negotiator makes. Interests are what generate the positions. Interests are a person's needs, wants, fears and concerns. For example, a dispute may arise between two brothers about which one should work on the weekends. They each take the position that they want the weekend off. The underlying interest of one brother is that he wants the weekend off so he can watch his children play in hockey tournaments. For the other brother, the interest is that he has a new girlfriend who works out of town and the only time he can see her is on the weekend.

*Invent options for mutual gains:*

Be as creative as possible. Once everyone understands each other's interests, try brainstorming to come up with as many solutions as possible.

*Use objective criteria:*

If the people in a dispute can shift their thinking from what they want to what makes the most sense, the merits of each possible solution will be easier to judge.

*Define success in terms of gains, not losses:*

If you asked for a 10 per cent raise but got only six per cent, you could look at this as a six per cent increase or a 40 per cent shortfall. Your satisfaction with the outcome of any dispute will be influenced by the standards you use to judge it. The question to ask is whether the settlement constitutes an improvement over the starting point.

Always strive to achieve win-win solutions. Even when a win-win solution doesn't seem to exist, one can usually be found with determination to do so.