

# WIDE-OPEN SPACES AND PLENTIFUL OPPORTUNITIES

LEGACY LEADERS | BY KEVIN SPAFFORD

THOUGH IT'S HOME, staying in the Netherlands meant confined spaces and limited opportunities for Menno Attema. Growing up on the family farm was enough to whet his appetite and encourage him to dream of more. So, during his college years, he participated in an exchange program to learn about farming practices in the U.S.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

He fell in love, not once but twice. The first was a love for the wide-open spaces and plentiful opportunities for farming in the Midwest. And the other was for his wife, Jeanne Ann, who he met at a church social.

Now 35 years later these corn and soybean farmers of Platte City, Mo., are facing yet another life challenge. Of their four grown children, three have aspirations of following in their parents' footsteps and becoming part of the family farming operation. Yet, like so many other families, the challenge today is not *will* someone take over the family farm, but rather *who*. Choosing from a brood of the willing is a very tough decision for parents.

## FINDING THEIR WAY

Today, the Attemas are finding their way through the succession planning



process and holding family meetings on a regular basis. They've attended some workshops, and know that many of the steps and some of the obstacles are best handled in open discussions around the table.

Beyond legal strategies, tax techniques and financial analysis, they're committing to leadership development, dividing job responsibilities and learning to work as a team. For this family in farming, the decisions are about how best to utilize their various talents to build a better business.

When the conversation comes around to succession, experience tells us most farmers:

- Know what they want to achieve; they just don't know where to begin.
- Want to have constructive conversations; they just don't know which questions to ask.
- Are interested in some form of planning; they just don't know who (or what profession) can help.

Like Menno, most farmers want a plan to protect the farm, ensure financial security and provide opportunities for a well-prepared next generation. They hesitate due to an overwhelming number of unknowns or confusion about what a plan entails.

I suggest you start with a family meeting. Bringing the family together to talk about the future of the family farm is very exciting. Children who may not know that a career on the family farm is an option will be pleasantly surprised. Parents who've never encouraged a career in farming may be heartened by their children's reaction.

Engaging in this one simple act — a family meeting — puts everyone on notice that “we care about creating future opportunities for our family in agriculture.”

In the meetings, the family should aim to establish common goals. It's normal for each person to focus on “What's in it for me?” But in a family operation, the attitude must be “What's best for the operation? And how can I contribute to the success of the whole?”

When a family sits around the table, the succession planning process comes alive as the conversation focuses on what each person can do

to grow the operation for generations to come.

To achieve planning success, every family will need to overcome certain obstacles. Challenges usually arise around questions related to fair vs. equal, in-laws, control, financial insecurity and family disharmony. These issues can be intimidating and cause all progress to stop. But it doesn't have to be that way.

First, recognize that each of these challenges exist whether discussed or not. Each can cause destruction of the family operation if left untended. And each will only grow in stature if not brought up and managed toward a constructive end.

Then, commit to continue the process, no matter what, how, or who may get in the way.

It's important to plan for success, devise strategies to keep the operation together and protect the family business from harm. For the Attemas, continuing success is a choice. **FF**

*Spafford's firm Legacy by Design (legacy-by-design.com) handles succession planning. Contact him at 877-523-7411 or KEVIN@LEGACY-BY-DESIGN.COM.*