

# YOU WON'T GO IT ALONE

LEGACY LEADERS | BY KEVIN SPAFFORD

SOME MENTORS offer perspective; others reinforce common sense. Yet, all share experiences from the past to offer insights of real and lasting value.

Mentor relationships come and go. Some are intentional arrangements, with a clear purpose and formal structure. Others are casual alliances, based on occasional meetings and random happenings. Formality encourages a person to set aside time and make an effort. Casual allows for a more relaxed and spontaneous relationship. But either can have a lasting effect.

It may not be obvious to you, but I grew up on a farm. Not in a literal sense like most farm kids, rather metaphorically — I spent the summers of my most formative midteen years milking cows, putting up hay, and chopping silage on a small dairy in southeast Wisconsin.

I can only imagine what you may be thinking: “That’s not really growing up on a farm.” But it was for this California kid. I got my first taste of farm life a few years earlier during a family vacation to see our relatives in the Midwest. After that, Aunt Mildred and Uncle Milton were persuasive and unrelenting in their invitations to return. They wanted me



to spend the summer and “learn to work.”

They didn’t pull any punches either. They talked of the heat, mid-summer thunderstorms and never-ending work.

So, return to the farm I did. And it was there that I learned not only to work, but also to love and appreciate a lifestyle that only a small segment of our population will ever know. The place wasn’t much as dairies go, but it was the world to me. Those summers I worked side by side with my uncle Milton and cousin Terry. Each hot work-filled day started and ended with milking chores. The to-do list only grew, and as late August became early fall, I realized the work didn’t end; only the seasons changed.

## A FEW CRUCIAL STEPS

Unfortunately, my uncle only knew hard work. He didn’t know about succession planning. And it’s what he didn’t know, and therefore couldn’t do,

that cost the family everything. From a farming heritage to an agribusiness future is but a few crucial steps. Leaving a legacy is about cultivating multigenerational success. It’s done by preserving the farm, promoting it as a healthy business and then passing it to a well-prepared next generation.

My uncle Milton was a mentor who taught me a lot about farming. Along the way, he instilled the following 10 ideals I live by to this day:

- Each farm is a blend of natural resources, microclimate, production history and familial heritage.
- Family values are taught with actions and emotions, not just words.
- Commit without reservation, be intentional in your work and be absolute in your integrity.
- You can’t change others; instead, learn to respect their strengths.
- Your past doesn’t determine your future, but it does affect your opportunities.
- Improving performance is more valuable than good luck.
- Don’t compare yourself to others, rather complement their achievements and learn from their efforts.
- The agrarian work ethic can, and should,

be applied to every worthwhile endeavor.

- Love grows in a place of respect, admiration and appreciation.
- Don’t be afraid, learn what you don’t know, prepare for the unexpected, acknowledge your shortcomings.

Those ideals are foundational to the succession planning model I encourage you to adopt. Planning starts with a complete analysis of your financial security. From there it focuses on a plan for leadership development, which leads naturally to the next step: provisions for a smooth, gradual ownership transition. And no plan is complete if it does not mitigate the estate tax and provide for your dependants in the case of untimely death.

As you deal with the various demands of the farming profession, succession may be among the most formidable challenges you’ll ever face. But you won’t go it alone. Over the years we’ve created a community of farm families who are committed to passing America’s agricultural capabilities to a well-prepared next generation. **FF**

*Spafford handles succession planning.*  
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