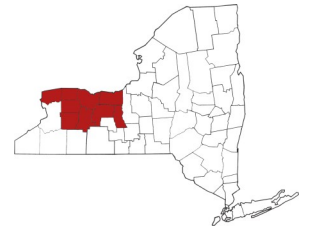


SUCCESSION PLANNING FACT SHEET



Using a Facilitator to Keep Your Succession Planning Process on Track

by Joan Sinclair Petzen



You Can Expect a Facilitator To:

- Set meeting agendas
- Regulate time frames
- Establish behavioral guidelines
- Employ idea generation techniques
- Use decision-making methods
- Offer problem-solving steps, and
- Strive toward reaching agreement

The author, Joan Sinclair Petzen, works with Cornell Cooperative Extension's Northwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team as a farm business management Specialist. Her passion is helping "next generation farm managers to gain the skills needed to operate a successful farm business"

Succession planning can be a daunting task. Many farm managers, particularly in smaller businesses, may only be involved in succession planning once or twice in a lifetime, when getting into or out of the business. Thinking about succession planning as a process rather than an event can help one gain perspective on the intentional time commitment required to make your transition plan work. Often business owners rely on a facilitator, coordinator, or navigator skilled in understanding family businesses to help keep the process moving and be certain the right people are involved in developing and carrying out the succession plan.

A facilitator's role is to foster the process and create an inclusive environment for developing and executing a succession plan for a business. The business owner(s) remain in control of the decision making associated with the plan while the facilitator keeps the process moving forward. The role of the facilitator includes convening meetings of the owner(s), successor(s) and family members or advisors who are helping with the planning process. The facilitator does not usually provide advice on specific aspects of the plan. The facilitator may help identify advisors who are able to address specific issues the business owner(s) and successor(s) want to know more about.

SELECTING A FACILITATOR

A trusted neutral party, who understands the various aspects of a successful succession plan is needed for the facilitator role. Sometimes an advisor like an accountant, attorney or business associate can fulfil the facilitator role. Other times it is another person like an extension specialist, community member or colleague who understands business succession. A facilitator will be familiar with agricultural and family businesses and the unique challenges businesses must manage to enable successful transition of decision-making authority and ownership. Your facilitator can also help to keep advisors on task by outlining a timeline and reminding everyone of the tasks required to achieve succession goals.

Choosing a family member to be your facilitator can have some pitfalls. Some family members may not be as open with another family member as they are when a neutral third party facilitates. Due to the emotional connection to all involved, it can be difficult for a family member to be perceived as neutral. "Family member facilitators should understand where their competencies end and when professional intervention is necessary. Intensive conflict, sociopathic behaviors, communication breakdowns that threaten the ability to continue the meeting or domination by one person or a small

CHOOSING A FACILITATOR - QUESTIONS TO ASK

When your business is ready to enlist the services of a facilitator for guiding your succession planning process the International Farm Transition Network (Kirkpatrick & Baker, 2014) suggests asking a few questions of the facilitator you are considering. The facilitator's answer to these questions will help you determine if this person is someone you feel comfortable working with on the important and personal matter of succession for your farm business.

- Where are you from?
- Do you have farming in your family?
- What is your educational and professional background?
- What experience do you have working with farm businesses and the families who run them?
- How many families have you coordinated farm succession plans for?
- Our family [shies away from conflict/has a lot of conflict] – how comfortable are you facilitating that type of family interaction?
- What are some of the things you'll have us do during this process?
- Will it only be one session or more over time?
- How flexible are you with scheduling?
- Where would you like to hold these meetings?

group are symptoms that professional help may be needed," according to the Family Business Consulting Group (Ward, 2015). A professional knowledgeable of family businesses may be perceived as more objective since their only goal is to keep the family engaged in the process of developing, fine tuning and executing their succession plan.

According to information from the International Farm Transfer Network's training manual for facilitators (Kirkpatrick & Baker, 2014), "effective facilitators manage a process that is perceived to be fair so that the farm family will trust the process and own the outcome." Characteristics of a fair process are:

- Assessment and evaluation of decisions and process to allow making course corrections when warranted
- The facilitator will guide the process to:**
- Gather information
 - Outline the purpose of each meeting based the goals and timeline of participants
 - Encourage participants to make decisions
 - Hold participants accountable to their words and commitments to the process
 - Create honest expectations surrounding the process
 - Help participants to clarify their values, vision, and goals for the business.

Succession planning is about developing a roadmap for change of leadership and ownership of a business and in agriculture that is typically a family business. A quality facilitator brings knowledge and skills for engaging the family in a process to complete the tasks necessary to initiate, carry out and follow through on the family business succession plan as well as skills to help the family maintain good relationships through the process. Make Things Happen – Integrated Succession Planning for Non-Profits and Family Businesses (Fairborn, 2021) suggests the following expectations of a facilitator for the tasks to keep the process moving and support healthy relationships among participants.



To foster and maintain good relationships among the family, facilitators will:

- Encourage participation
- Promote inclusion
- Address power dynamics
- Reduce influence factors
- Interrupt dysfunctional behaviors
- Discipline problem members, and
- Encourage anger management

Skilled succession facilitators will understand the barriers to succession planning. One key barrier is the reluctance of elder farmers to relinquish control of their farm and business. Worldwide farmers develop a unique connection with their land and sometimes their animals. Conway, et.al. discuss “The reasons why older farmers fail to plan effectively and expeditiously for the future are expansive, and range from the potential loss of identity, status and power that may occur as a result of engaging in the process, to the intrinsic multi-level relationship farmers have

with their farms. The common denominator identified was that intergenerational family farm transfer is very much about emotion.” (Conway, et.al., 2019) On the other hand, the younger generation has a tremendous amount of respect for their elders. This respect can lead to successors being reluctant to express their desires for the future or bring up changes that they think might be controversial in discussions about the business going forward. A skilled facilitator recognizes these power dynamics and will help each party to be heard and work toward a mutually beneficial path forward.

A facilitator benefits farm businesses throughout the succession process by providing a framework and keeping focus on decisions farm business owners must make to advance their plan. They are familiar with the roles of all the professional advisors on a business transition team. Often, the facilitator anticipates roadblocks and provides the grease needed to keep the decision makers working together to advance the plan to fruition.



REFERENCES

Ward, J.L.; Do-It-Yourself Family Business Meetings; Family Business Consulting Group – Facilitator from inside the family: <https://www.thefbcg.com/resource/do-it-yourself-family-meetings/>; 2015

Kirkpatrick, J.; Baker, J.; Farm Succession Facilitator’s Manual; <http://www.farmtransition.org/questions/>; 3/2014

Fairborn, L.; Family Business Facilitation: <https://www.makethingshappen.net/family-business-succession/family-business-facilitation/>; 2021

Conway, S.F., McDough, J., Farrell, M., Kinsella, A.; Human dynamics and the intergenerational farm transfer process in later life: A roadmap for future generational renewal in agriculture policy, International Journal of Agricultural Management, Volume 8 Issue 1; 2019.

Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.