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A Web Site to Help Farm Families Communicate About Farm Transfer

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A Web Site to Help Farm Families Communicate About Farm Transfer

Abstract

A Web site was developed to help farm families learn about communication strategies that can be used when there are sensitive issues relating to farm transfer. The site, *Who Will Get Grandpa's Farm? Communicating about Farm Transfer*, features six scenes filmed on a farm near Delphi, Indiana. The family members in the scenes include a farmer and his spouse, father, son, and a brother. Each conversation between family members shows examples of direct control, indirect control, and no control. An interactive quiz helps users distinguish between the three communication strategies.

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Introduction

After conducting interviews with 40 farm families about retirement and succession planning (DeVaney, 2002), I concluded that some families have difficulty discussing farm transfer. Some farmers could not talk to their fathers about slowing down as they grew older. Some older farmers were anxious about losing authority if they began the transfer process. Other sensitive issues were the choice of a successor and dividing assets among siblings. Many of these issues have been mentioned in previous studies (Anderson & Rosenblatt, 1985; Marotz-Baden, Keating, & Munro, 1995).

The Farm Transfer Process

Attorneys who specialize in farm transfer stated that the first step for the farmer was to decide that he was ready "to let go" (DeVaney, 2002). The next step was deciding on a successor. After farmers make those decisions, they need to create a flow of income for themselves and decide how to divide assets. The attorneys said that it was important to help the retiring farmer understand how his estate planning actions would affect the remaining family members. Attorneys also talked about the need for the farmer to make estate plans while he or she was in good health and had enough time to allow for a transfer of property.

Many of the sensitive issues in farm transfer involved situations where a son wanted to take care of his father, but the father wanted to remain independent. In a situation like this, communication strategies using varying levels of control are helpful (Morgan & Hummert, 2000). For instance, older adults in their parental role have traditionally been on the giving end of direct control messages. At the same time, middle-aged adults must constantly reevaluate their level of direction as they negotiate the changing levels of dependence and independence of their aging parents and their maturing children.

Web Site Content

Types of Communication Strategies

To help families deal with sensitive issues about farm transfer, I developed a Web site, Who Will Get Grandpa's Farm <<http://www2.ces.purdue.edu/farmtransfer>>, about communication strategies. The setting for the Web site is a farm near Delphi, Indiana. The communication strategies are: direct control, indirect control, and no control (Ryan, Bourhis, & Knops, 1991). When the person who is speaking uses direct control, he is demonstrating that he wants to take control of the situation. Using indirect control shows that the speaker is flexible and will share the decision making. Using the third strategy, no control, shows that the speaker is talking about the subject but that he is not attempting to control the situation.

Here are some examples from the Web site. In the first scene, the farmer is speaking to his father. Using direct control, he said, "It is time for me to take charge of the planning." In another version of that scene, the farmer uses indirect control, saying, "I want you to feel comfortable with easing up on the farm work." In the third version of that scene, the farmer displays no control when he says, "I am thinking about planting next year. Do you have any new ideas?"

Research has shown that indirect control is usually the preferred strategy (Morgan & Hummert, 2000). However, in a situation where life is threatened, such as driving when vision or hearing is impaired, direct control could be the preferred strategy.

Conversations Between Family Members

The Web site includes six scenes where family members talk about issues related to farm transfer. The farmer talks to his father, spouse, son, and a brother. In each scene, the dialogue includes the three types of control strategies. The Web site provides the scenes as text that can be read or as video clips. After users view the scenes, there is an interactive quiz to help users distinguish between direct control, indirect control, and no control.

Influence of Attitude, Preparation, Timing, and Behavior

Users are also introduced to the influence of attitude, preparation, timing, and behavior on the communication between family members. For example, the farmer is advised to think about his brother's feelings when he talks to him about farm transfer. Although the brother, who lives off the farm, may have been uninterested in the operation of the farm, he may be more willing to help his on-farm brother talk to the parents when he realizes that his parents won't live forever.

The site is available at <<http://www2.ces.purdue.edu/farmtransfer>>. It's free, and no password is needed. The National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE) provided funding to develop the site, and USDA-CSREES helped fund the interviews with farm families that provided information for the site's development. The site has also been included on the CSREES Financial Security in Later Life Web site <<http://www.reeusda.gov/financialsecurity>> as a resource for consumers and educators.

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