



Risk and Resilience in Agriculture

From Risk to Resilience in Agriculture: The Human Resource (Rev. 9.049)

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Many ranch and farm families today experience high levels of stress due to low cash flow, long work hours, unpredictable prices for commodities, constant mixing of work and family life, working side by side with several generations, and demanding physical labor. Many agriculturally related stressors are predicaments over which farmers and ranchers have little control, e.g., the weather, commodity prices, and changing federal regulations.

Ranching and farming have become one of the most stressful and dangerous occupations. They have the highest unintentional death rates per 100,000 in the U.S. According to the National Safety Council (1998), currently the agricultural death rate is 20 per 100,000 which is five times as high as the national average for all industries of four per 100,000.

All of these problems and predicaments put some families at risk of economic loss and high stress, anger, and depression levels. Nevertheless, many farm and ranch families

are highly resourceful and resilient. They are able to “bounce back” quickly after a setback.

An At-Risk Family

From a human relations viewpoint, what does a ranch or farm family look like who is at risk? When one family that we will call the “Smith Family” was at risk, they had many problems. They were using few resources. The Smith Family (Fetsch & Zimmerman, in press) consisted of an elder couple in their late 50s to early 60s, their children and spouses who were in their late 20s to early 30s, and two young grandchildren. They had two sons, a daughter, and their three in-laws. The Smith Family meetings were chaotic and disruptive. The mother explained: “We hash over issues for hours and hours and they never get resolved. We don’t agree on a direction or plan, so we just go on doing what we did before and stay mad at each other.” Family members interrupted each other or withdrew. No one listened to each other. They screamed and yelled at one another. Anxiety,

depression, and anger were common feelings in the Smith Family. The mother said, “If our operation was like a business, we could fire one or two of our family members—but we can’t!” The blood relatives blamed much of the stress and tension on Jean who as an in-law was the family scapegoat. The son-in-law was eager to leave the ranch with his wife and set up their own business. Siblings had not gone to each other’s home to share a meal or socialize for six years. The elder couple had not taken a vacation in 31 years. The young couples had not taken a vacation in 8 years. Trust was low. Conflict was high. The tension erupted into a fistfight between the two brothers in the cow lot.

A Resilient Family

The fistfight motivated the Smith Family to recognize that they were at risk of losing their entire family operation—mostly due to human relations problems. So they sought professional help and employed a co-consultant team of marriage and family therapists to assist them. The male and female consulting team provided family consultation over 42 months on the ranch and at neutral motel conference rooms (Fetsch & Zimmerman, in press). As a result, the family wrote a shared vision for their future three to five years later—“We want our family ranching to be harmonious, consensual, enjoyable, and profitable.” They practiced holding effective family meetings monthly (Fetsch & Jacobson, 1999). They practiced open communication about needs, desires, and future possibilities. They learned to listen to and hear each other’s viewpoints. They learned how to problem-solve. They created policies providing equity pay for men and women in the family operation. They communicated openly about financial decisions and intergenerational transfer of the labor, management, cattle, and land. They shifted from an autocratic to a “consensuocratic” decision-making style

(Zimmerman & Fetsch, 1994). This means that during their family meetings they communicated, problem solved, and negotiated on major issues until no family member had any major objections to the decision. All family members could live with the decision. They learned to “reframe” the meaning of situations from negative ones to positive ones. They learned to set priorities and deal with problems directly while they were still small. They practiced stress management, time management, and relaxation exercises. They restructured their organization. Couples visited in each other’s homes, socialized, and shared meals. They took off some evenings and scheduled vacations. They had many more positive interactions than negative ones with each other. They complimented one another on their strengths. Their sense of humor grew. They achieved their vision—“We want our family ranching to be harmonious, consensual, enjoyable, and profitable.” They turned around their financial situation from one that was about to go bankrupt to one that was profitable again.

From Risk to Resilience

The key to shifting a family from one that is at risk to one that is resilient is to be flexible and use healthy strategies that work to help family members ride the ups and downs of family living. By reading and practicing the recommendations in Fact Sheets (e.g., Fetsch, 1999a, 1999b; Fetsch & Jacobson, 1999), families can regain their resilience or ability to bounce back after experiencing a stressful event.

Some fact sheets that readers can order are:

-Farming, ranching: Health hazard or opportunity? (Fact Sheet 10.201)

-Ranching and farming with family members (Fact Sheet 10.217)

-Manage anger through family meetings (Fact Sheet 10.249)

These Fact Sheets are available from “The Other Bookstore” Cooperative Extension Resource Center, 115 General Services Bldg., Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-4061, <www.colostate.edu/depts/CoopExt/>.

Some skills that can help families shift from being at risk to being more resilient are communication, trust building, problem solving, negotiation, goal setting, and strategic planning. Families that know how to adapt well to inevitable life changes can increase their marital and family satisfaction levels.

Smart families are ones who know that when their human relationship problems are too complex to solve on their own, they need to seek professional help. They ask friends for the names of professionals who work well with situations like theirs. They look in their telephone yellow pages for effective counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, mental health practitioners, social workers, or pastoral counselors.

Practical Application

As you reflect on the two scenarios above from the Smith Family, which scenario is your family more like? When your family experiences high stress levels, like during harvesting or planting, what is it like? Is there a level of tension—“Hurry up and go get the pickup and diesel the combine so we can move to the home place before dark?” Do you feel like you’re “walking on eggs” when you are around an angry or depressed family member? Are explanations few and far between? Do you find yourself wanting to stay away and leave the tense family member alone? If so, these and other symptoms suggest yours is like a family at risk.

On the other hand, does your family re-connect well after a stressful event? Soon after the harvest, or after a death, does your family do something to talk about the event and acknowledge family members’ different feelings, perceptions, and meanings of the stressor event? Do they listen to one another and acknowledge whatever different family members express? Do they express genuine concern for one another? Do you feel like you are OK and they are too? Are self-esteem levels high? Does your family reach out to connect with relatives or friends for support?

Compare your family right now to the At-Risk Smith Family and to the Resilient Smith Family. Using a 1 (At Risk) to 9 (Resilient) scale, give your family a number between 1 and 9 that represents your assessment of your family’s current “Risk to Resilience Level.”

Jot down ideas from what you have read of steps you could take to increase your family’s resilience.

Finally, communicate with your family. Ask for what you want to be a more resilient family. Take the steps necessary to become as resilient as you can. You will be glad you did.

References

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