Ag Legacy

Helping agriculture nurture its legacy. . .

Ag Legacy

When the Ag Legacy Feels Like It Belongs to Everyone Else

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Welcome to another Ag Legacy recording.

Ag Legacy is a series of presentations and other online materials intended to assist rural families in creating their own legacy by beginning the thought process and opening the lines of communication.

Today's recording will address the topic Leadership in Your Ag Legacy

Helping agriculture nurture its legacy. . .

Today's speaker

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I'm John Hewlett Ranch and Farm Management Extension Specialist in the University of Wyoming Department of Agricultural & Applied Economics

I will be your speaker for today's Ag Legacy presentation

Welcome, everyone. Today we are talking about a difficult, yet incredibly common problem in farm and ranch transition.

We often spend a lot of time talking about how to transfer the land, the cattle, the machinery, and the paperwork.

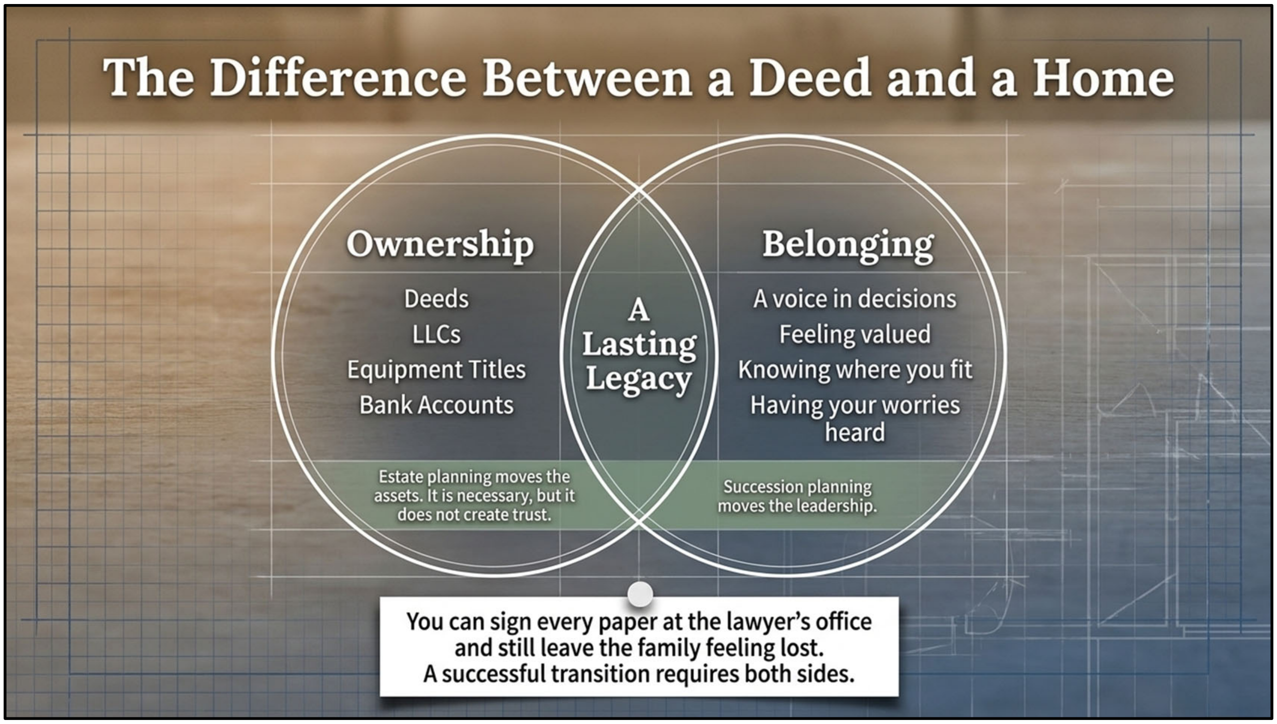
But what happens when the legal transition is moving forward, but the family members don't feel like they belong in the plan?

Let me start by telling you a story about three people: Wade, his dad Earl, and his brother Brett.

Wade climbed out of his truck at dusk and heard his dad on the phone with Brett, who lives six hours away in the city.
They were talking about whether to renew the hay lease next spring—a decision Wade had been working on for weeks.
Wade has pulled calves, supervised haying crews, and balanced feed bills for 15 seasons, but Earl didn't ask him about the lease.
Brett got the first call.
Meanwhile, inside the house, Earl hangs up the phone and spots a $40,000 invoice on his desk for a sprayer upgrade Wade ordered last week.
There was no discussion about financing or timing.
Earl rubs his eyes, thinking: 'Forty years on this place, and nobody asks me anything anymore'.

And back in the city, Brett hangs up the phone and wonders, yet again, when he stopped being part of the family.
The decisions always seem like they are already made by the time they call him.

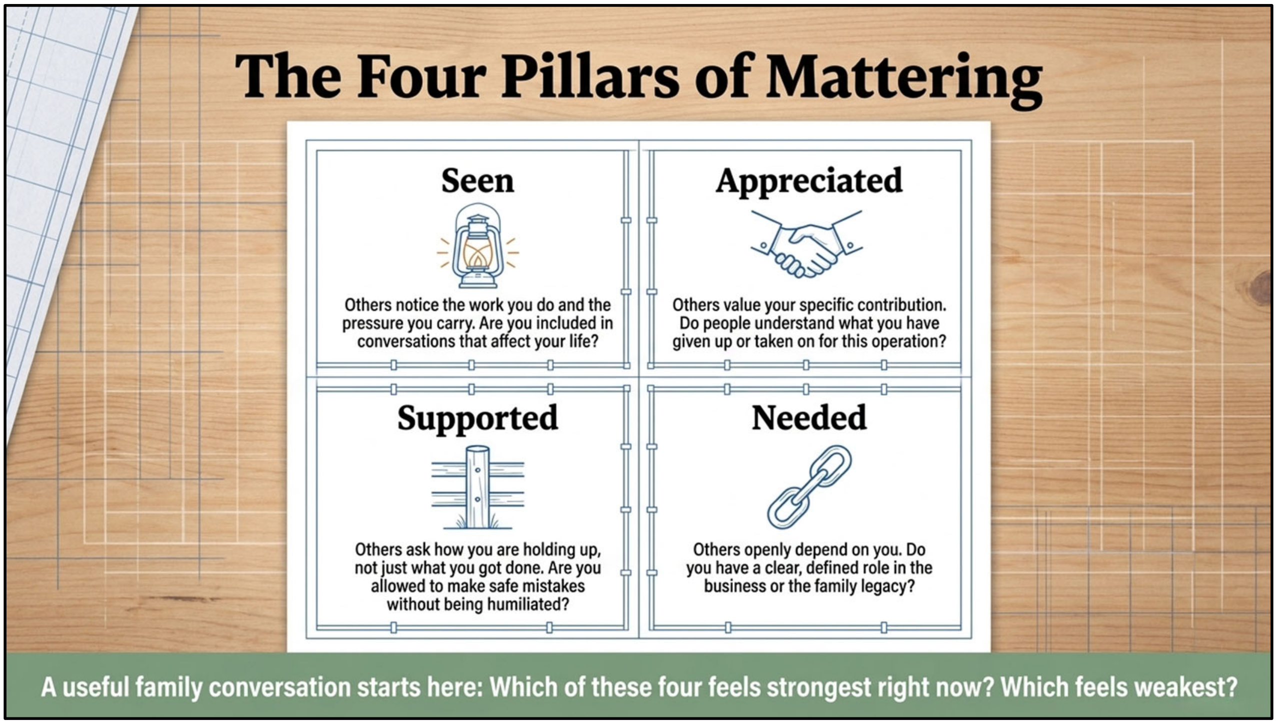
Three people. One legacy. Each one feeling like it belongs to someone else.
Today, we are going to look at why this happens and give you practical tools to ensure that everyone in your family feels like they still matter during a transition.



Families easily pass down deeds, titles, and equipment lists.
That is actually the easy part. The harder part is passing down the sense that the place still belongs to each person who loves it.

As this slide shows, you can sign every single piece of paper at the lawyer's office, have a flawless estate plan, and still leave your family feeling completely lost.
Estate planning is necessary because it moves the assets, but it does not create trust on its own.
Succession planning, on the other hand, moves the leadership.

To build a lasting legacy, we have to bridge the gap between Ownership and Belonging.
Belonging means a person has a voice in decisions, feels valued, and knows where they fit in the family's future.
If we only focus on the paperwork, we risk leaving people behind.
A successful transition requires both sides.



A recent Wall Street Journal article discussed the human need for a 'mattering span'—the deep need to feel seen, useful, and depended on throughout our entire lives.
When people on a farm or ranch don't feel like they matter, they pull away.
They stop offering ideas, they stop showing up at the kitchen table, and some even leave the operation entirely.

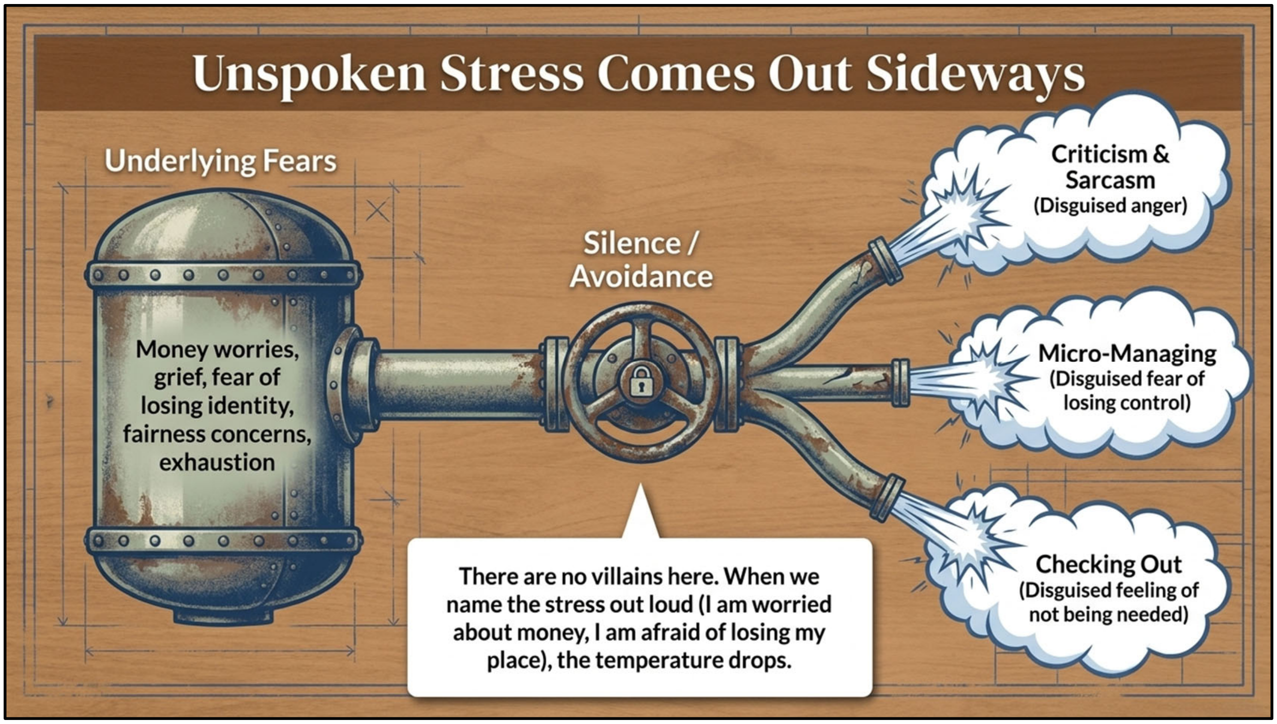
Researchers tell us that four things make a person feel like they matter:
Seen: Others notice the work you do and the pressure you carry. You are included in conversations that affect your life.

Appreciated: Others value your specific contribution. They understand what you have given up or taken on for the operation.

Supported: Others care about how you are doing—not just what you got done.
You are allowed to make safe mistakes without being humiliated.

Needed: You have a clear, defined role, and others openly depend on you.

A very useful family conversation starts right here: ask yourselves, which of these four feels strongest right now, and which one feels weakest?



When the feeling of belonging slips, stress begins to build.
And as we know in agriculture, unspoken stress comes out sideways.

Inside the pressure tank are underlying fears: money worries, grief over a transition, the fear of losing your identity, fairness concerns, or just plain exhaustion.
But because we often use silence and avoidance instead of talking about it, that pressure leaks out in disguised ways.

It might look like criticism and sarcasm, which is often disguised anger.
It might look like micro-managing, which is often a disguised fear of losing control.
Or it might look like someone completely checking out, which masks the feeling of not being needed anymore.

There are no villains here.
When family members act out, it is rarely because they want to destroy the business.
When we can name the stress out loud—by saying things like, 'I am worried about money,' or 'I am afraid I won't have a place here'—the temperature immediately drops.

Untangling the Three Knots of Farm Transition

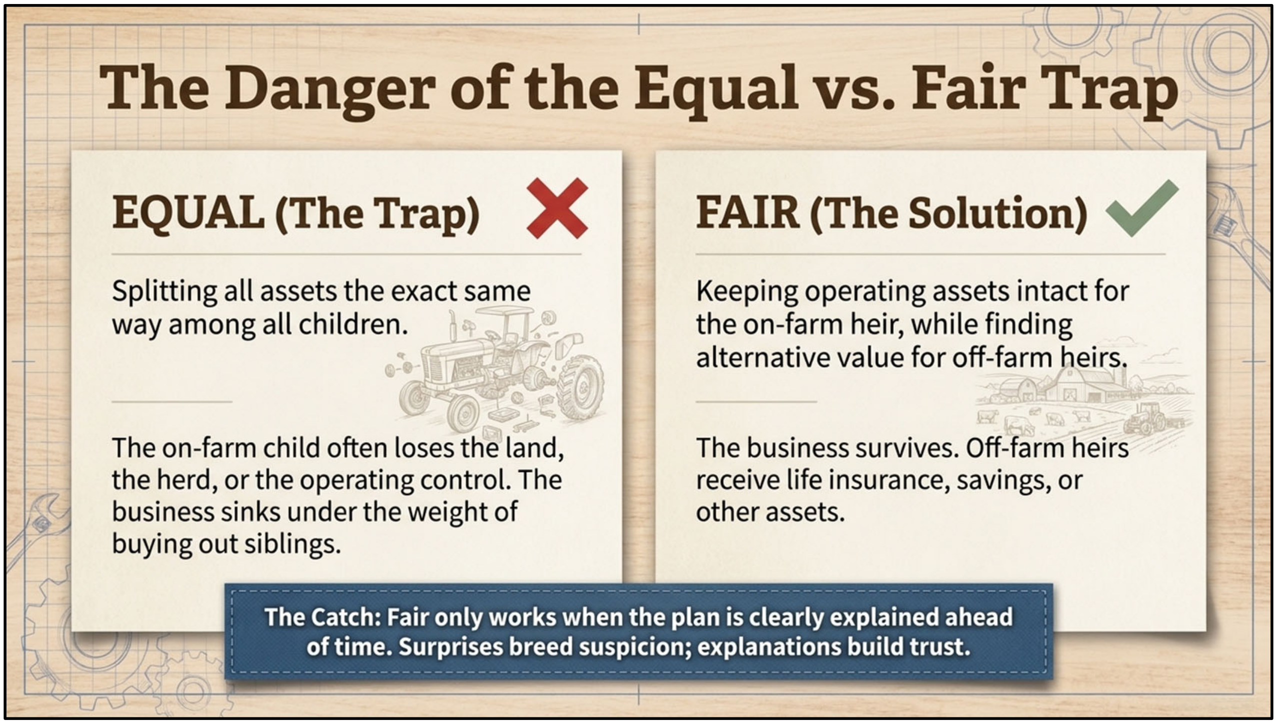
	Ownership	Management	Voice
What it is	The Deed, the titles, the bank accounts.	The Daily Plan (when to sell calves, what to plant, fixing fence).	The Hearing (knowing what is happening before decisions are final).
Who holds it	The legal founders or heirs.	The active operators.	Off-farm heirs, in-laws, spouses.
The Trap	Thinking that owning the land means you must micromanage the daily operations.	Thinking that doing the daily work automatically gives you the legal deed without a transition plan.	Assuming someone doesn’t deserve to hear the plan just because their name isn’t on the deed or the work roster.

Many family fights start because we mix up three completely different things: Ownership, Management, and Voice.
Untangling these is critical.

Ownership is about the deeds, titles, and bank accounts.
It is usually held by the legal founders or heirs.
The trap here is thinking that just because you own the land, you must micromanage the daily operations.

Management is the daily plan—when to sell calves, what to plant, or fixing the fence.
The active operators hold this.
The trap is thinking that doing the daily sweat-equity automatically gives you the legal deed without a transition plan in place.

Voice is about the hearing. It's knowing what is happening before decisions are final.
Off-farm heirs, in-laws, and spouses hold this.
The trap here is assuming someone doesn't deserve to hear the plan just because their name isn't on the deed or the daily work roster.
People can absolutely deserve a voice even if they are not the owner or manager.

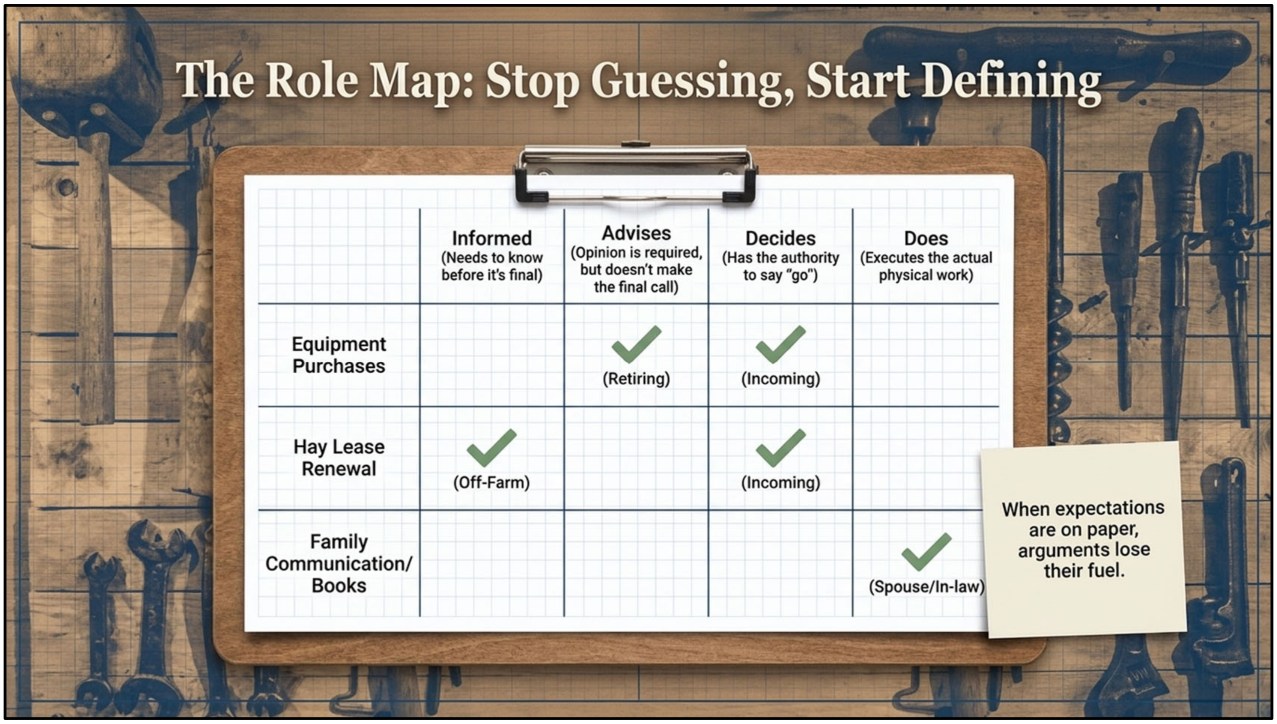


Mixing up ownership and management often leads to the 'Equal versus Fair' trap.

'Equal' sounds great in theory—splitting all assets the exact same way among all the children.
But in agriculture, this is often a trap. The on-farm child often loses the land, the herd, or operating control, and the business ultimately sinks under the weight of having to buy out siblings.

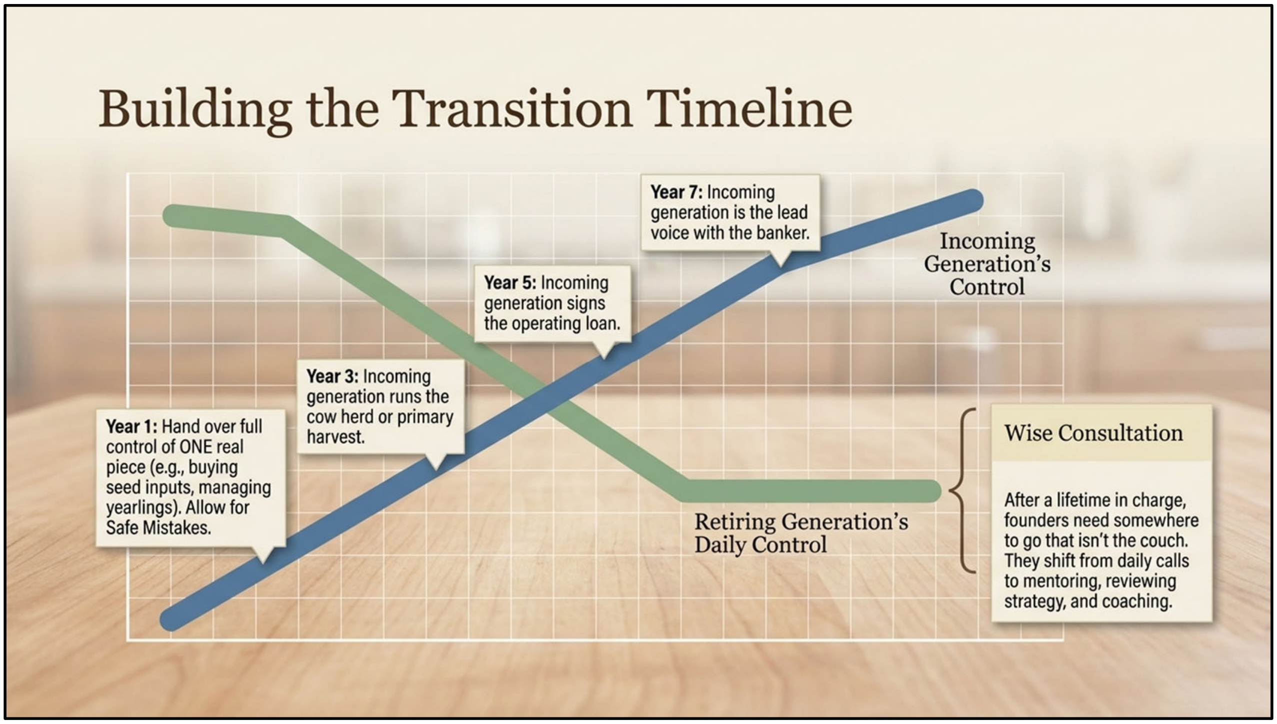
'Fair' often requires a different structure than equal, and it only works when the plan is explained early and professionally reviewed..
Fair means keeping the operating assets intact for the on-farm heir to keep the business going, while finding alternative value for off-farm heirs.
This might mean they receive life insurance, savings, or other non-operating assets.

But here is the catch: Fair only works when the plan is clearly explained ahead of time.
Surprises breed suspicion, but early explanations build trust.



One of the best tools to stop people from making assumptions is 'The Role Map'.

For every major area of your operation—feed, equipment purchases, hay leases, family communication, transition planning—write down four categories:
Informed: Who needs to know about this before it is final?
Advises: Who's opinion is required, even if they don't make the final call?
Decides: Who actually has the authority to say 'go'?
Does: Who executes the actual physical work?
Look at the slide: maybe the retiring generation advises on equipment, but the incoming generation decides.
An off-farm heir like Brett might just need to be informed about a hay lease.
An in-law might do the books.
When expectations are clearly put on paper, the guessing stops, and arguments lose their fuel.

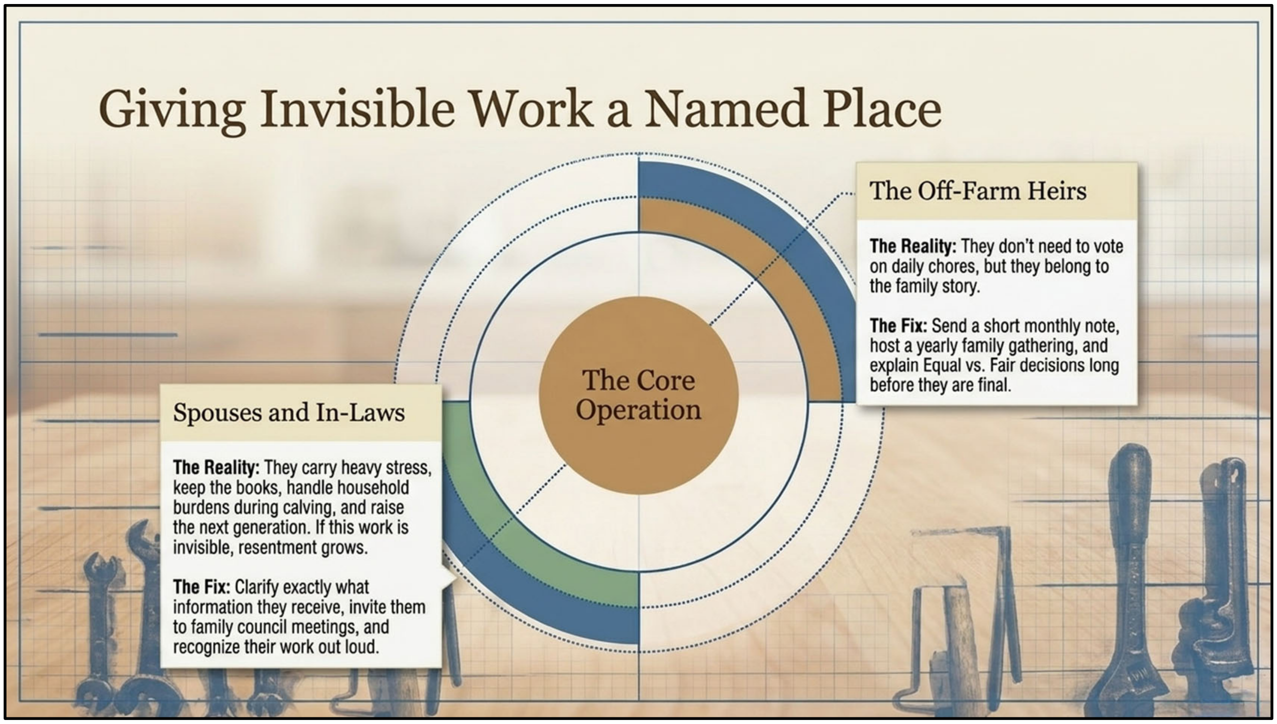


'Someday' is not a transition plan.
To fix the feeling of being a hired hand, you have to give real decision rights early, on purpose, and on a real timeline.

Look at Year 1: Hand over full control of one real piece of the operation.
Maybe it's buying seed inputs or managing yearlings.
And allow for 'safe mistakes'.
Learning without humiliation is vital.
If the next generation is never allowed to fail small now, they might fail big later.

Then, pick years and write them down.
By Year 3, the incoming generation runs the primary harvest.
By Year 5, they sign the operating loan.
By Year 7, they are the lead voice with the banker.

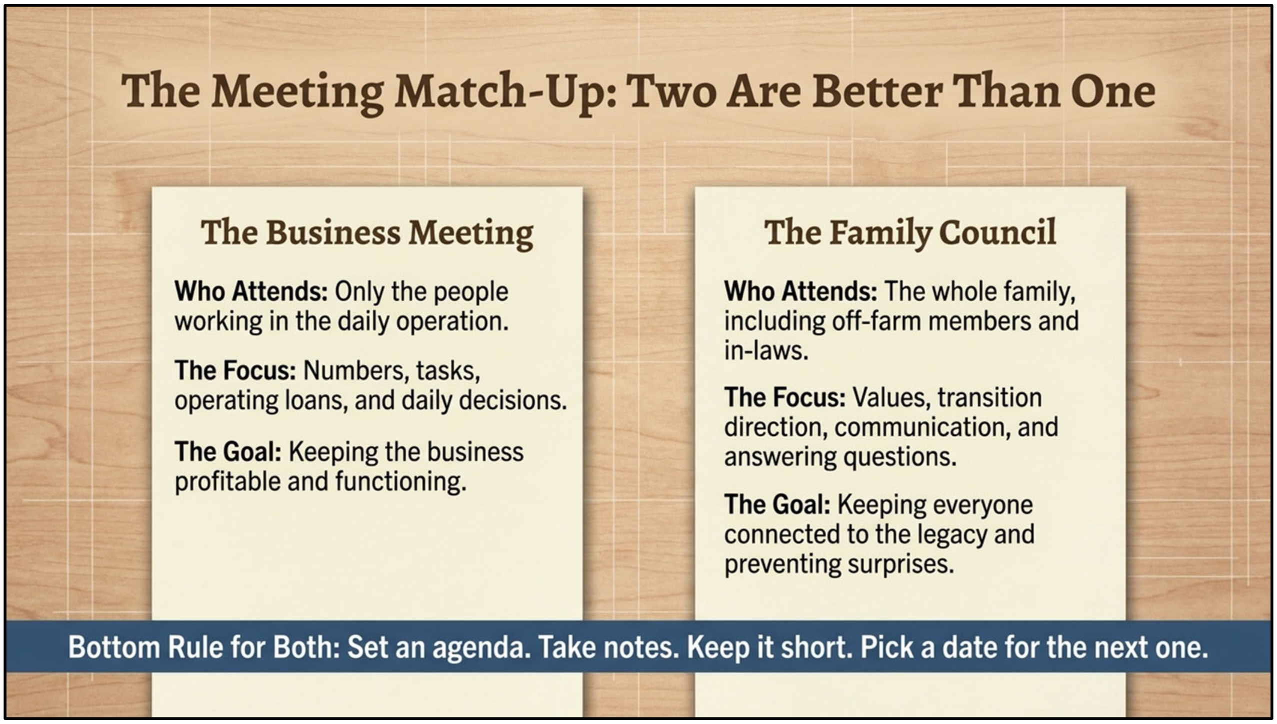
But notice the bottom green line. As the older generation steps back, they don't drop to zero. They shift into 'Wise Consultation'.
After a lifetime in charge, founders need somewhere to go that isn't the couch.
They become mentors, review strategy, and coach the next generation.
Your wisdom still matters, even as authority changes hands.



We also have to talk about the people on the perimeter: Spouses, In-laws, and Off-Farm Heirs.

Spouses and in-laws often carry heavy stress.
They keep the books, handle household burdens during calving season, absorb family tension, and raise the next generation.
If this work goes unacknowledged, resentment grows quickly.
The fix is to clarify what information they receive, invite them to family council meetings, and recognize their work out loud.

For off-farm heirs, the reality is they don't need to vote on daily chores.
But they still belong to the family story.
The fix here is simple acts of inclusion: send a short monthly note, host a yearly family gathering, and explain those Equal versus Fair decisions long before they are final.

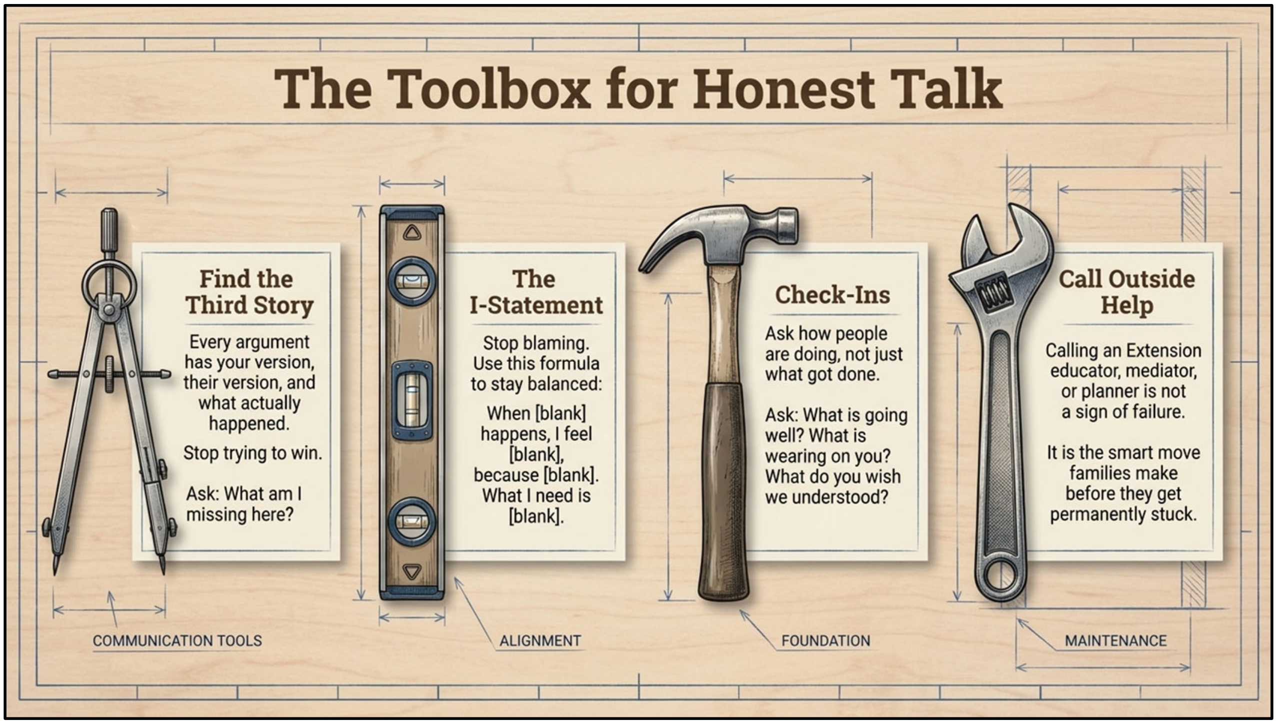


The biggest enemy of belonging is silence.
When people stop talking, they fill the gaps with painful stories that are usually wrong.
To prevent this, two types of meetings are better than one.

First is The Business Meeting.
Only the people working in the daily operation attend this.
The focus is numbers, tasks, and daily decisions.
The goal is keeping the business profitable.

Second is The Family Council.
The whole family attends, including off-farm members and in-laws.
The focus here is values, transition direction, and answering questions.
The goal is keeping everyone connected to the legacy and preventing surprises.

For both meetings, follow the bottom rule: Set an agenda. Take notes. Keep it short. And pick a date for the next one.



When you have these meetings, you need the right tools for honest talk.

Find the Third Story (The Compass):
Every argument has your version, their version, and what actually happened.
Stop trying to win. Ask instead, 'What am I missing here?'

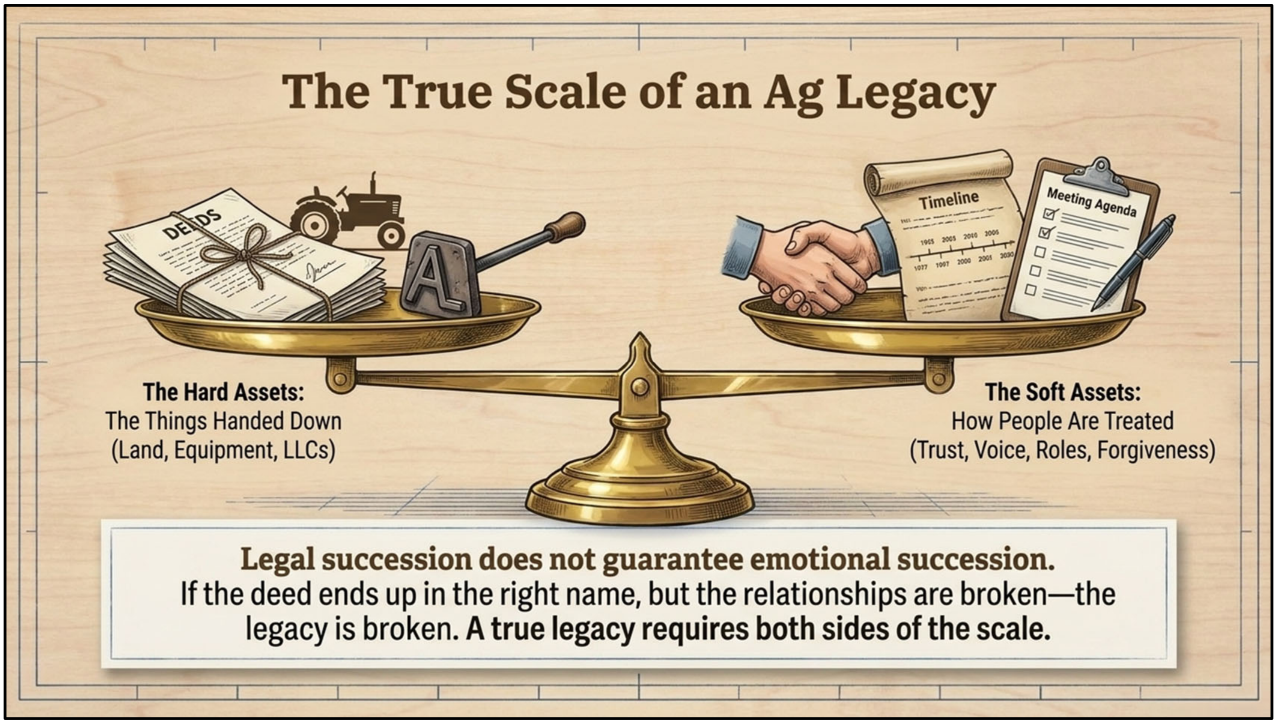
The I-Statement (The Level):
Stop blaming.
Use this pattern instead:
'When [this] happens, I feel [this], because [this]. What I need is [this].'

Following this approach keeps the focus on the problem, not attacking the person.

Check-Ins (The Hammer - The Foundation): Farm families often ask what got done. Instead, ask how people are holding up.
Ask: What is going well? What is wearing on you? What do you wish we understood?

Call Outside Help (The Wrench):
Calling an Extension educator, mediator, or planner is not a sign of failure.
It is the smart move families make before they get permanently stuck.

Also, don't forget the simplest tools of all: saying 'I am sorry' and practicing forgiveness.
A simple apology has saved more family operations than any legal document.



As we look at the big picture, remember the true scale of an Ag Legacy.

On one side, you have the hard assets: the land, the equipment, the LLCs. These are just the things being handed down.
On the other side, you have the soft assets: how people are treated, trust, voice, clear roles, and forgiveness.

Legal succession does not guarantee emotional succession.
If your family ends the transition with the deed in the right name, but with broken relationships, the legacy is broken too.
A true legacy requires both sides of the scale to be balanced.
If your family ends with strong relationships, even after hard conversations, the legacy is whole, no matter who ends up with what.

You cannot order people to feel like they belong.
But you can create the conditions that allow belonging to grow into the future.

I want to leave you with a challenge for this week. Sit down at the kitchen table with just one family member.
Ask them these two honest questions:
What would help you feel like you matter to this place?
What do you need to understand better?
And then, just listen.
That is where a lasting legacy truly begins.

If you have found this presentation helpful, we also recommend that you check out the newsletter on the same topic. You can find it on our website at Ag Legacy.org.

And while you are there, be sure to check out our other materials including modules, newsletters, and additional materials to help you in creating your own Ag Legacy.

THANK YOU!

AGLEGACY.ORG

CREATING A LEGACY FOR AGRICULTURE AND ITS FUTURE

Thank you for tuning in!