

Talking succession with Lyn Sykes at the South Burnett dinner

The South Burnett dairy region hosted Lyn Sykes at their annual dairy dinner on 22nd March 2017. Lyn is well known across Australia for her depth of experience in farm family succession planning and facilitating family communication. She has worked in the area of succession planning for over 30 years.

Lyn discussed some of the issues farming families face in succession planning and some of the things experience has taught her around family communication. Farmers often struggle with the succession issue simply because it combines two complicated and treasured things – family and business. The topic of succession is often avoided and usually raises ‘it’s ugly head’ in the peak of a family crisis or a tragedy, when it can no longer be put to the side. At this point, family emotions are peaking and no-one is thinking clearly or has the ability to make sustainable decisions around the future of the farm business.

Lyn’s experience working with farming families has taught her that if a family is finding succession difficult and has avoided it for a long time, it will only get more difficult the longer that they leave it. Putting off starting the process or the conversation because they are not sure what to do will only make the process more difficult the longer time goes on. The hardest step is making a start!

Lyn was recently asked to present at a Conference regarding the “Winning Formula” for Succession. Her immediate response was that there is no ‘winning formula’. Every family and situation is very different and they have to

work through a process and find their own way. However, she could summarise the following points that may contribute to ‘Succession Success’;

- The single biggest contributor to a successful succession process was having a functioning family unit where people communicate well with each other. In this case, the succession process is likely to be much less traumatic. If a dysfunctional family is involved in the process then the best method is to get in and get the job done, no matter how painful it is. Get lots of help to assist the process and it is likely that once the plan is in place, the family will begin to heal again.
- Consider how the existing farming generational owners came by the farm. What was the fallout of that process? Lyn believes that the biggest influencer of what happens in the current generations plan will be what happened in the previous generations plan. Most don’t even realise that their past experience is influencing how they think.
- How does the existing owner feel about themselves in their own thoughts? For many individuals, their self-esteem, or worth, is tied up in what they do, e.g. They are a dairy farmer in Nanango. If what they do is their identity, then the succession process will be more difficult. It’s hard to give away, or move away, from who you are. Often this issue can be mistaken for a “control” problem, or the farm owner not being willing to relinquish control.
- Consider the generation that the owner and family members are from. Each generation will have their own beliefs about what is right & wrong, fair and equitable depending on how they came to be, and this will have a dramatic effect on their expected outcome from the plan.



The Dagan family from Maidenwell enjoying a night out at the South Burnett dinner



Lyn Sykes discussing farm family communication at the South Burnett dinner event.

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Of course, these are just a few pointers in the process and it is a whole lot more complicated in practice. Lyn has a fantastic publication written around farm family communication which can be downloaded here <https://grdc.com.au/.../GRDC-A-Guide-To-Communication-For-Farming-Familiespdf>

The South Burnett dinner event was also livestreamed and is available to view on the Subtropical Dairy Facebook page or the website www.dairyinfo.biz.