

New book resource on dealing with farm in-law dynamic

by Paul Rayner
Recorder staff

The in-law factor can be a challenge under any circumstances. On the farm, it can be a make or break for both the family and the business. Now there is a new resource for all within that dynamic to help deal with the challenges and find the place where all views are respected and the extended family can become a team.

Elaine Froese and Dr. Megan McKenzie of Boissevain recently released Farming's In-Law Factor. Although it took about a year to research, write and complete, according to Froese, a writer and life coach, the genesis of the book came before.

"Based on what I was seeing in my coaching practice," Froese explained, "there were many concerns about family dynamics, about the in-law factor. There were really no resources available in the agriculture industry to deal with this. The book has been percolating for about three years, and when Megan came to town with her conflict resolution expertise, we decided to make a practical guide for farm families."

McKenzie, who has a PHD in conflict resolution, has been involved in the practice on an international scale. Although trying to make peace in far away conflicts might be seen as different than family farm concerns, McKenzie found that there was a common ground.

"I could see a lot of the wisdom and theories in other areas of conflict resolution fit in here," McKenzie stated. "I could see the opportunity for positive change from them. What the situation is often the same, same conflicts. Farmers don't just farm, they are farmers. It is their identity. The same patterns play out."

The whole mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, father-in-law, son-in-law conflict has often been talked about, written about, joked about. Blending families is not easy. How is it different on the farm?

"The farm creates its own stressors," Froese explained. "You live where you work and in close proximity to your in-laws and you work with them. The family and the business are overlapped and enmeshed."

The book deals with the different topics that contribute to the situation, and strategies to deal with them. For one, they introduce the culture of the farm and small towns—something Froese said should be given to every farm bride prior to marriage. The situations are complicated and can be overwhelming if not dealt with.

Some are inter-generational



MEGAN MCKENZIE AND ELAINE FROESE
... authors of Farming's In-Law Factor

in character. People come from different places, not just geographically, but also emotionally and traditionally. For example, in the book, a daughter in law said she came from a quiet family to a family of "yellers." Different ways of dealing with conflict are obviously going to be a challenge. But it is also how people see each other and their roles.

For example, a daughter-in-law coming into the farm has what they call "fresh eyes". It is a different perspective. How is that seen?

"Are fresh eyes something seen as enhancing the business, are they accepted," McKenzie asked, "are they a piece to the puzzle or do they create a great deal of unrest? Is it an outsider coming in as an asset or an outsider coming in as an outsider?"

The question becomes—"when will I be accepted as a member of the family and the farm?" There are the concerns of educated younger people coming back to the farm who have had experience in management elsewhere, but are not allowed into the decisions by the parents when they get to the farm.

"It becomes micro managing," Froese stated, "it becomes based on patterns and traditions, which becomes poor decision making, based on previous decisions and traditions."

But there are also challenges in respecting the older generations and their dedication to the farm. They have experience, and sometimes feel that is not appreciated. They put their souls into it, and expect to be taken seriously.

"It is hard for the father-in-law to let go," McKenzie said.

son-in-law must be taken into account. He will have a different clash, that being when does he become an equity partner in the farm. For all of the younger generation, equity becomes a concern. They can work for 25 years on the farm and own nothing.

"They are not given a timeline," Froese said. "There needs to be a shift from employee to partner."

In the book, there are chapters dealing with each basic in-law, what their wants and needs are, to help people understand perspectives. There are also charts detailing the changes that should be occurring in people's lives as the decades pass. Times change and so do roles. Different generations clash over work time and personal time, risk management, how much debt to take on. Add another family in, and you add challenges.

How to solve this problem?

Froese said respectful family meetings, where each perspective is discussed on each issue.

"You need a lot of respect and love for everyone on the team. You need to hear each other and respect each other. Different is not wrong it is just different. You have different ideas and personalities. You have to make it into something that works."

"I think people feel isolated," McKenzie added. "They need to know they are not the first people to have that problem. Yes, this is a real problem and here are different ways to deal with it. You need to focus on the positive and positive choices."

There is a lot of storytelling, including that done with cartoons. Different perspectives are in the book, and not only those of challenges, but of in-law families who have done well. There is also the

time when it does not work out and there is a chapter that deals with ending a partnership with grace. The big thing is to stop the cycle of avoiding conflict, which is common to farm families.

In the end, there are many hopes for the book. Academically, they are hoping it can be used in universities and colleges. For farm families, the idea is it could be a tool to open dialogue, a guide to lead families from rough waters to safer harbors.

"We wanted to gather up the wisdom and make it into a useful tool," McKenzie explained, "a one-stop place. There has been very little research on this - it is pretty lean. This is one of the few resources that actually looks at in-laws."

"We want to give tools and assessments," Froese added, "to help change behavior. We want to set farm families free."

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