INTERGENERATIONAL FARM FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. Carolyn Cunningham

Under the Mentorship of Professor Kristina Morehouse

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By

Cayla M. Waters

May 2013
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

Thesis or Project Director

Faculty Mentor

Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University

MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
ABSTRACT

This thesis studies intergenerational communication in farm families during the succession planning process. The research focuses on intergenerational relationships between fathers and sons. Due to the lack of research on intergenerational communication in farm families, this thesis examines the role communication plays in this relationship, and how communication affects the succession planning process of passing down the family farm. Communication accommodation theory is used to understand the communication processes taking place within the father-son relationship.

The research methods used to gather information for this study are focus groups. The focus groups are made up of 3 father/son pairs who are currently experiencing the succession planning process. Research findings showed that families are not communicating with each other while they are working through the succession planning process. When families are not communicating with each other it leads to conflict, which complicates the working relationship, ultimately complicating succession planning. When succession planning is complicated it can affect the livelihood of the family’s farm business, but more importantly the well-being and long-term health of the family unit as a whole.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................... 4
Importance of Study ........................................................................................................... 4
Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................. 5
Definition of Terms Used ................................................................................................. 7
Organization of Remaining Chapters ............................................................................... 7

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .............................................................................. 8
Philosophical Assumptions & Theoretical Basis ............................................................... 8
The Literature .................................................................................................................. 12
Critical Evaluation ......................................................................................................... 20
Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 21

CHAPTER 3: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY .................................................................. 22

CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY ............................................................................................. 27
Results of the Study ........................................................................................................ 27
Focus Group Responses ................................................................................................. 28
Discussion ...................................................................................................................... 34

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES & CONCLUSIONS ........................................................... 41
Limitations of the Study ................................................................................................. 41
Further Study & Recommendations ............................................................................... 42
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 43

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 46

APPENDIX A- Focus Group Research Questions ......................................................... 50
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of Study

Most U.S. farm families assume a family member will take over the farm operation, but deciding which family member will take over and how they will take over is a growing question. As the average age of the U.S. farmer grows, it becomes a concern of farm families of how and when they will begin the succession planning process. Having an effective succession plan in place for the farm is crucial to the farm’s livelihood because only 20% of family farms survive the transfer to the second generation (Becker, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum & Pitts, 2009).

The discussion of what child will take over the family farm operation and how the duties of the farm will be passed down is something many families struggle with. Making decisions about who gets what, how much and at what time are the questions farm operators and their family members must answer when working through a succession plan. This time period for families can be extremely stressful because of the shift of power taking place. The farm operator is beginning to think about stepping down from his job, the successor or successors are assuming new duties, and the overall family dynamic is changing. When a decision is made regarding the succession plan, and the farm operator begins to step down from their duties, tensions can grow between the farm operator, who is also the father, and his children (Rasmussen, 2011). “During this period the operators often reduce their hands-on responsibilities, but retain control which leaves the new generation fumbling for a way to ease tension and assert their ability to manage both the hands-on and business sides of farming” (Rasmussen, 2011).
Due to the amount of stress placed on family members during succession planning, proper communication techniques typically slip through the cracks. Without adequate communication, it leads to even more confusion and conflicts among family members. The goal of this research is to help families find a way to maintain communication during the succession planning process in order to maintain the stress level and happiness of family members involved. All of the participants involved in the research study are life-long farmers and have grown up in a farming lifestyle so they are able to provide an account of what it is like to live in a farming environment.

Statement of the Problem

Succession planning is important to the survival of the family farm. In 2007, small family farms made up nearly 88% of the total U.S. working farms (Banker & Hoppe, 2010). Due to the large amount of small, family operated farms it is crucial to the economy that they stay in existence. Since only one fifth of family farms survive the transfer to the second generation, it is important to find out what is preventing these family farms from surviving the generational transfer (Chrisman, Chua & DeMassis, 2008). Small family farms can be successful in transferring the farm, but they must work on a succession plan prior to the farm’s transfer.

In order for a family to prepare for a succession transfer of the farm they must communicate their needs, wants and expectations to one another before the transfer occurs. All family members must mutually agree upon how the farm operation will be conducted. Everyone involved needs to be aware of what their current and future roles will be with the farm operation, this includes parents, siblings, grandchildren and any
other named successors involved in the process. Without clear and concise communication of these thoughts, messages can be misunderstood or confused leading to conflict among family members.

Currently, there is little research on farm family communication during succession planning. The research that has been done on family business communication can somewhat be related to this situation, but since farming is a complex business environment more research needs to be done in this area. Research has been done to analyze conflict management during farm succession planning and the economic aspects of farm succession planning (Rasmussen, 2011). The goal of this research is to look at farm family communication during succession planning and understand why miscommunication occurs among family members, ultimately leading to conflicts and complicating the succession process.

Communication accommodation theory is used in this study to help look at the issue of farm family communication. This theory focuses on the role that conversation plays in day-to-day living. The theory focuses on communication within conversations that take place and the theory has helped to understand family communication. The premise of the theory is that communicators adjust their communication styles to express their ideas, values, attitude, or intentions (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). It argues that communicators develop perceptions of one another based upon their style and delivery of speech methods (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). Since the focus of the research is farm family communication, CAT is a good fit to help understand and dissect the communication taking place between generations of family members who are working on
the farm together because it looks at how family members perceive each other based on their speech delivery.

Definition of Terms Used

**Family Farm**- a farm managed/owned by a parent and/or child and one in which the parent and children live on/near and work on said farm. This farm must be in at least the second generation of the family to be considered a “family farm”.

**Farm Family**- the owners of the farm, their spouses and dependents, and the spouses of the dependents and any of their dependents.

**Succession Planning**- the process of identifying people to potentially fill leadership positions within the farm business and passing down the farm business operation to these identified individuals so they can manage the operation appropriately.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter two is the literature review that provides a complete analysis of current research and literature on the topic of family farm communication during succession planning. The third chapter outlines the scope and methodology of the research study. Chapter four will contain the analysis of information provided in methodology section and research findings. The conclusion and limitations of the study are located in chapter five.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Every year many farm families begin to undergo the daunting task of intergenerational transfer of the farm estate to a fellow family member. This time is very challenging for many families because it is more than just a business transaction; it is their family heritage and livelihood. Since so much is at stake during this transitional period, communication among family members can go awry.

Communication analysis of the intergenerational transfer of the farm is necessary because it can ease the transition for the family. If all family members are actively and effectively communicating with each other it makes the process go much more smoothly. It is necessary to establish a communication standard when farm families are working through this time because it will ease this process. Making families aware of their communication styles and their actions can help adjust behaviors to work together better.

This literature review provides a complete review of literature regarding family farm communication and succession planning. The review is broken down into sections covering different aspects of research including: philosophical assumptions, theoretical basis, farm succession planning, family business, family communication and intergenerational communication. This study is grounded in communication accommodation theory. More detail regarding this theory and how it applies to the study is discussed in the theoretical basis section of this chapter.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Theoretical Basis**

*Philosophical Assumptions*
Communication is a necessary tool for survival for all human beings. Different aspects of communication help us to establish relationships and build a desired life. As human beings travel through life they are forced to make ethical decisions on a daily basis. Ethics is a highly regarded area of study because there are many different philosophies to look at when studying ethics. This study will look through the lens of the British philosopher, W.D. Ross.

W.D. Ross views ethics as a matter of doing our duty in the world. He published his book *The Right and the Good* in 1930 and discusses six basic ethical duties we should uphold. These six basic duties are: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence and self-improvement. Ross views his six duties as conditional behaviors. According to Griffin (1994), Ross said, “we don’t need a rational method to discover duty-right actions are self-evident to anyone who desires to be good” (p. 462). He views ethics as commonsense morality that we should learn as we experience life. There does not need to be hard and fast rules to obey when viewing life decisions from an ethical standpoint, but rather people will naturally know how to behave in certain situations.

The six basic ethical rules Ross discusses in his book can be related to intergenerational communication in farm family. All six rules are basic life skills that each family member should abide by and these rules should also be commonsense to family members. These six rules can serve as a guideline when family members communicate with one another, not only on the farm business setting, but in life.

Fidelity is one of the six rules of what it means to be faithful. Faithfulness is important when working as a family because you must have trust and loyalty to your family and the business for it to succeed. If a family is unfaithful to one another it can
complicate business matters. Reparation is another of Ross’ rules which means to make amends. It is important for a family to do right among one another when working in business together because it helps keep communication lines strong, and it helps keep the business strong too. It is important for families to express gratitude not only for their business, but one another. Expressing gratitude shows that people are thankful for each other and by communicating it, this helps to strengthen bonds between family members so they are able to work together more efficiently. W.D. Ross also states that justice is an important duty. Justice is the act of being fair, or just. Family members must be fair to one another when working together. Beneficence is the act of doing good or producing good. It is important for family members to be the good, and produce good in the world with each other so they can make the world a better place overall. The last of Ross’ six basic duties is self-improvement. Farm families must be willing to work on themselves and improve what they are doing on an individual level before they can make a difference within their family or business. The six basic duties that Ross discusses can relate to farm families in succession planning because they act can act as a guide for behavior and thoughts throughout the planning process. Succession planning and working with family members can be stressful and it is easy to lose sight of what is really important during stressful moments. If families use these six basic duties to help guide their thoughts and actions towards what is really important it can help alleviate some of the stress and miscommunication that occurs among family members.

Theoretical Basis

The ethical view of self-evident duties that Ross discusses works well with this thesis. This thesis discusses how farm families communicate intergenerational
succession. To ground the research theoretically, communication accommodation theory acts as a base for the study. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) was developed to help understand how and why people change their communication during interactions with people they interact (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

Communication accommodation theory is made up of two components: convergence and divergence. Convergence is when a communication alters their speech to become more like the audience they are communicating with, or to appeal to the audience they are communicating with. Divergence is when the communicator alters their speech to be opposite of the group they are communicating with in order to stand out or establish distance from the group. Communicators practice convergence when trying to seek approval or “fit in” to a group. Divergence is practiced when a communicator seeks to find social distance from a group and this might happen when communicating with and undesirable group. Convergence and divergence can happen either consciously or subconsciously and communicators are not necessarily aware of when they behave this way (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

This theory is important to the study of intergenerational communication in farm families because it helps to establish a framework to assist families that are going through the succession process. Intergenerational succession in any business contains a number of different aspects and steps the family must go through. Communication accommodation theory provides an excellent framework for this study because it “provides a powerful explanatory and predictive model for understanding the ways in which micro-level interpersonal adjustments are influenced by broad social group memberships” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 22). Recent developments with CAT have developed
four sociolinguistic encoding strategies within the theory: approximation strategies, interpretability strategies, discourse management, and interpersonal control (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 23). This research will look at approximation strategy to help determine communicate strategies of the family.

In order to better understand each aspect of the sociolinguistic encoding strategies associated with CAT it helps to break down each individual strategy. The first of the strategies listed above was approximation strategies. Approximation refers to the communicative partner’s speech style. Previously this was described as convergence, or moving towards the partner’s speech style, and divergence moving away from the partner’s speech style. For the purpose of this study, accommodation strategy will be used to analyze how the intergenerations (i.e., father-son, father-daughter) communicate and see if any convergence or divergence is seen when conducting research. Using approximation as a tool to interpret CAT can mark the family territory at a psychological level (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

The Literature

Now, more than ever, people are working longer in their lives. They are working long into their retirement years for a number of reasons. On average, retired farm operators have worked in the farming industry for over 32 years (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). It is anticipated that the average age of farm operators will rise from 53.3 to 57 years old across in the U.S. (Fetsch, 1995). The advanced age of operators is not a surprise since most of these operators call their farm home and it is the place they grew and lived their entire life (Banker & Hoppe, 2010). Also, advances in health care
and farm equipment have allowed farmers to work later in life than their previous generations (Banker & Hoppe, 2010).

Intergenerational farm succession transfers are becoming a growing business transaction in the United States. The average age of a farm operator is 55 years old (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). As the current population of farm operators reaches retirement age there is a need for a succession plan to be established for when the retirement occurs. Since farmers have an established, successful business there is an understandable desire to leave the business to their loved ones (Ip & Jacobs, 2006).

Family farms make up a large portion of our nation’s income. In 2001, U.S. farm households had an average net worth of $545,860 compared to $395,500 for non-farm households (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). In addition to a larger net worth than average households, family farms also report large annual sales. In 2007, small family farms reported sales of $250,000, which made up 88% of total sales for all U.S. farms (Banker & Hoppe, 2010). Given the importance to the economy and the well-being of the farm family, there is a need to study the communication that takes place during an intergenerational succession transfer.

Even though farming and family-run farms make up such a large portion of the U.S. wealth and business enterprises, there is a lack of communication research. The focus of most of the research has been on defining family farms so they can be distinguished from nonfamily farms (Sharma, 2004). Research on the communicative aspect of the farm transfer is scarce and was difficult to find. Although information exists regarding the business aspect of farming succession plans, little information exists on the transfer taking place intergenerationally or within the family. After conducting the
research to write this literature review it has become more evident that this research field is very important to the well-being of farm families in the future, but more specifically studying the intergenerational transfer of the farm during succession planning is very critical (Foltz & Marshall, 2012)

Farm Succession Planning

Succession planning for a successful farm transfer is crucial for future success of the farming operation. Taking into account that only one-fifth of family farm transfers survive the transfer to the second generation, the issue of planning becomes evident (Becker, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum & Pitts, 2009). With the growing demands from the economy and government it is very important for a family to plan for this major event. In family farms the farm ground itself constitutes a physical asset that is highly illiquid, indivisible to a large extent, and is accountable for a large portion of the family wealth, if not all the wealth (El-Osta & Mishra, 2007).

Succession planning is a process, and it is not something that can happen overnight. Researchers agree that succession planning is more of a process than a single event because it requires years of planning to pass on the reigns to another member of the family (Handler, 1994, p. 134). Four factors can have a large effect of the succession or transfer of the farm. The most important factor of the succession transfer is the current farm operator’s age. Followed by the age of the current operator is the size of the farm, net worth and the successor’s ability to take over the farm successfully (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). These four factors are not the only traits to keep in mind when preparing a business succession transfer. The age of the oldest child in the family also has
a significant influence on the timing of the transfer in intra-family succession (Sharma, 2004).

One of the most important aspects of a successful transfer in family business is the preparedness of the successor. Family business literature has shown that the level of preparedness of the next generation is the most important aspect of a successful business transfer (Sharma, 2004). In addition, the successor must have a good relationship with the current business operator in order to perform successfully in the job (Sharma, 2004). Current research reports that 52% of farm operators indicated that the successor to the farm participated in the farm business (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). Of the 52% of successors working on the farm currently, 38% of them are already participating in management activities and decisions for the business (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). Sons of farmers were found to take over the farm business upon retirement of the current operator (Lange, 2012). There are benefits for the successor to take over the family farm operation. Intergenerational farm transfers allow the incoming successor to overcome borrowing constraints due to the farm business already being established (El-Osta & Mishra, 2007). Setting up a business is a very expensive task and the farm already being established both legally and financially it saves the successor time and energy.

Research indicates there are reasons why succession plans may not be established in family farming operations. One reason a family may not establish a succession plan is due to slim profit margins and complex property issues (Becker, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum & Pitts, 2009). A lack of awareness of the importance of a succession plan may also exist. A recent survey revealed that only 34% of farm operators who indicated they will retire in the next 5 years had a succession plan in place (El-Osta & Mishra,
2007). With only 34% having a plan in place, this leaves 66% of family farms without an established succession plan. As stated earlier, succession planning is not something than can happen overnight and it takes years of planning to have the plan succeed.

One of the biggest reasons for families not to setup a succession plan is a lack of awareness of the issue. According to Fetsch (1995), “part of the problem is the lack of information and effective strategies for transferring the labor, management, and assets from the elder generation to the younger generation” (p.5). Farming is not the only industry where there is a lack of succession planning for family business. The inability to develop a succession plan and strategy is noteworthy in all family business, in any industry (Fitzpatrick & Koerner, 2002). Fetsch (1995) also reports that if the proper “mix” of technical tools and people skills were taught, farm families could position themselves for success far beyond the 21st century.

*Family Business*

Due to the lack of research on family farms and intergenerational succession transfers, it was necessary to look at family business research to gain a better understanding of the subject matter. Since farming is a business and family farms can be directly related to family business, the topic of family business was studied. The results and correlation found between farm family business and family business was relevant.

One major trait that both family businesses and family farms have in common is that only a small percentage of both manage to survive the transition to the second generation (Chrisman, Chua & DeMassis, 2008). Even if a business does survive the intergenerational transfer, most fail soon after the second generation take control (Chrisman, Chua & DeMassis, 2008). Dyer (2003) suggests that family firms are
inefficient and unlikely to survive in the marketplace. In addition, most organizational scholars accept Dyer’s statement and view the family business as a dying breed not worth the time to research investigation (Dyer, 2003).

Family business is something that someone is born into and it is hard to escape once they are a part of the operation. Most careers of family members whose family owns or operates their own business start at the dinner table (Dyer, 2003). Family business is discussed in the home, or even at the dinner table and the entire family is made aware of the happenings going on in the business. In addition to the constant discussions regarding the business, visits to the place of business at an early age. Tasks such as doing odd jobs around the company serve as a means to socialize children growing up in a family business setting (Dyer, 2003).

Research on family business indicated that the lack of communicating feelings and wants exists (Hubler, 2010). Family members in business together have trouble disclosing what they really want out of situations. They use face-saving techniques to hide their feelings to not show what their true desires are for the business. Reasons why family members hide their emotions or opinions when working together is due in large part because they do not want to discuss certain topics with one another. Hubler reports family members often say, “I don’t think I want to bring that issue up with my family members” when he asks about risky topics (Hulber, 2010). The issue of families avoiding communication or altering their opinions with family members is a very important reason why communication-based research needs to be done on the topic of intergenerational communication during succession with farm families.

*Family Communication*
Research on communication within the farm family is needed to help families navigate their way through the succession planning and execution process. Fitzpatrick (2004) suggests we need to study the connection between family and communication to help improve personal and family relationships (p. 178). Families that work in business together have an interesting communicative relationship. Foltz and Marshall (2012) report that although researchers value family communication, especially within family businesses, few studies have been able to quantify family-business interactions and individual relationships (p. 3). In addition, Caughlin (2003) states that even though past literature has demonstrated the importance of communication in family relationship standards, the literature has not narrowed a focus and has discussed relationship standards outside of the family realm (p. 6). Communication scholars must work to further understanding on family communication, especially the link between family and work connections so we can understand how relationships are developed (Afifi & Krouse, 2007, p. 2).

Family communication equally affects everyone within the family at different levels. Parents are affected because they want to protect their children and provide the best opportunities for them. Sometimes during intergenerational succession processes parents try to divide the farm fairly between all of their children (Fetsch, 1995). In order to avoid conflict between their children, parents will keep quite and ignore signs of family tension during this process (Fetsch, 1995). Ignoring conflict and pretending it is not happening can make problems worse within a family. Families must keep lines of communication open and honest to have a successful succession transition (Rasmussen, 2011).
Intergenerational Communication

Communication between intergenerations of family members is an important area of communication to study. A key component in a successful family farm transfer is the intergenerational estate transfer (Fetsch, 1995). Studying the intergenerational relationship in a family is a huge need because according to Barker, Kaplan, Moreno & Rimler (2004) “these landmark ‘succession events’ will be the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in U.S. history” (p. 2). It is estimated that approximately $10.4 trillion of net worth will be transferred intergenerationally by the year 2040, with $4.8 trillion being in the next 20 years (Barker, Kaplan, Moreno & Rimler, 2004).

Even though intergenerational transfers are important to family business, it has been difficult for previous research to quantify a successful succession process and its characteristics when passing on estates from generation-to-generation (Foltz & Marshall, 2012, p. 3). There is a lack of research both nationally and internationally on intergenerational communication and farm succession in regard to potential farm successors and their siblings (McLeod, 2012, p. 4). In addition, there is very little research available on intergenerational farm transfers, more specifically the economic implications (Lange, Johnson, Hudson, Johnson & Gustafson, 2011, p. 17). There is a need for more communication and conflict management research to be done in the area of agriculture (McLeod, 2012). These topics are not widely taught in agriculture either at a university or cooperative extension level and there is a defined need for it since agriculture is a business environment, and business requires fundamental communication skills (McLeod, 2012).
As more farm operators reach retirement age, there is a need to plan for the succession to take place once the farm operator retires. It is important to keep the family farm intact post succession because nearly one fifth of the U.S. wheat crop and over one forth of the corn and soybean crop in the U.S. comes from family run farms (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003, p. 11). The family farm is much more than a money making endeavor for farm families, it is a way of life. The farm is an asset whose productivity extends beyond that of the current operator (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003, p. 2). Farm operators and their spouses who have grown up on the farm may want to keep the farm due to an emotional attachment to the land (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003, p. 13).

If a family does not plan carefully for their retirement or transfer of the farm operation serious problems could arise such as financial insecurity, personal and family conflict and unanticipated capital losses (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). Families must remain open and honest with each other during the succession process. If communication between family members does not remain open and honest it could result in stress and complicate the succession process further.

Current research on farm succession communication is limited. It is important to study family communication during farm succession because a large portion of the U.S. population is engaged in family farming. Statistics show that there are nearly two million families engaged in farming at some level (Johnson, Mishra & Morehart, 2003). In addition, farming has become one of the most stressful and dangerous occupations (Fetsch, 2005). Adding communication stressors to the environmental and occupational
stress that already exists on the job could be fatal for farmers. By researching proper communication avenues farm families could use it could result in healthier, happier families.

Communication accommodation theory provides a framework that can help understand why families are not communicating honestly with one another. This theory helps to understand how and why people shift their communication to or from people they are interacting with (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 22). If the research shows family members are shifting communication to accommodate others it could help offer suggestions of how families could avoid conflict. The less family members are misunderstood, the more conflicts they can avoid. Avoiding conflict in families could allow for a more efficient and easy succession planning processes. Researching CAT and family members during the succession planning process could help understand how and why families shift their communication when interacting with each other.

Research Questions

After a review of the current literature we are able to develop multiple research question to fully analyze farm family interaction during the succession process. These questions will work to understand the full scope of intergenerational communication during farm succession.

RQ1. What does the family find works best when communicating with one another?

RQ2. What are some of the main problems the family reports when communicating with one another?

RQ3. How does the family alter their communication when communicating with each other?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

Scope

The scope of this research focuses on communication between generations of farm families during the succession process. The communication studied will focus on parent-child interactions. It is important to study intergenerational communication within farm families because communication can affect not only their family relationship, but also their working relationship. Since family farming is a family business, communication between family members needs to be researched more in-depth to better understand how the succession process functions for these families.

Methodology

Focus groups are the primary method used to collect data to assess communication behavior during farm succession planning. Focus groups are defined as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 173). This research method is useful to this study because it can be used to shed light on the construction of shared cultural understandings and narratives of everyday life (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 174-175). Farming is a specialized field of work and way of life for the families that are involved with it. Since farming is so specialized, it makes it very cultural specific. Face-to-face focus group interaction with the five farm operators and their family members will be conducted through qualitative research data.

The focus group research method allows the participants to feel more at ease during the farm succession planning discussion. Typically, focus groups encourage
everyone to participate in the discussion and they remove the sense of anxiety that can arise with one-on-one interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 178). Family communication, especially during succession planning can be a sensitive topic. By using a focus group to conduct research, the researcher facilitates communication between family members in order to see commonalities between succession processes, ultimately leading to participants sharing more information. To further create a comfortable and safe environment for participants to share information, the focus groups will be held a neutral location that everyone is familiar with.

Farm operators and their family members are subject to focus group discussion regarding their own succession processes. The communication practices being examined are verbal techniques and the researcher will look for the cause and effect on the family relationship (Rasmussen, 2011, p. 19). The purpose of the focus group will be to observe the verbal and non-verbal interactions within the farm family, more specifically the parent-child relationship. Two focus groups were conducted, depending upon the number of participants. Each group will be made up of no more than five participants each.

Participants

The research examined three farm operators and their family members who will be taking over the farm operation post-succession. A total of ten participants (farm operators and their family members) were asked to participate. The farm operators are all preparing for retirement, have went through retirement or are in the midst of a succession transfer process. To gather participants for the study a convenience sample was taken. For this particular research, a farm was defined as any owner/operator of less than 500 total cropland acres. Corn, soybeans and wheat are the primary agriculture crops of these
farming operations. These farms can also contain small livestock operations, but livestock is not the primary source of income for the farms. The farming operations ran by the research participants are located in Illinois, but more specifically Champaign and Vermilion Counties.

All research participants were members of a farm family who went through, or will go through the succession process. The ages of the farm operators and the family members varied due to the farm families being in different stages of the succession process. Some of these families were post-succession, while others were at the beginning of the succession planning process. Age of the participants acted as an important factor in determining where families were in their succession process, but did not alter the research outcomes. Gender played a role in this research study. For the study only men were recruited to participate in the study. This was not done intentionally, but only men volunteer to participate in the study.

Procedures

The research design for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research design was useful in this research design because it sought to answer the “why” or the “how” of key behaviors or dialogues (Rasmussen, 2011, p. 22). Focus groups were conducted face-to-face. Face-to-face focus group interaction allowed the researcher to not only evaluate verbal communication, but also nonverbal interaction as well.

Two focus group meetings took place at a mutually agreed upon time. During focus group meetings the researcher acted as the facilitator of the group. As focus group participants entered the location, they are were asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. To begin the session, the facilitator did a short introduction and
welcomed the participants to the study. At this time, the facilitator also reiterated the purpose of the study and took time for all participants to introduce themselves to one another. Once pre-session activities were finished the facilitator proceeded with the focus group facilitation.

During the facilitation process the focus group participants were asked five open-ended questions. These five questions were displayed in appendix A. The open-ended questions worked to find a relationship between communication accommodation theory and family/participant interactions. Throughout the questioning process the facilitator will tape recorded the communication interaction. The recording was used to analyze verbal communication after the focus groups were completed.

Once the focus group meetings were completed, the analysis of the verbal interactions between farm family members can began. For each of the five questions asked during the focus group interaction the researcher looked for common themes that emerged during the discussion in regard to communication accommodation theory. In addition, farm families will be classified father A, B, and C and son A, B, and C to distinguish differences in family communication and succession duration timeframe. In order to classify the information received during focus groups, the data was divided into sections based on the answers to each specific research question.

**Validity and Reliability**

The research questions asked in this study were designed to guarantee validity because the questions followed a formatted guideline. Research questions were developed prior to conducting the focus groups. The facilitator of the focus group did not stray from this list of pre-developed questions. In addition, the research sample that
participated in the focus groups was prescreened to ensure they qualified to participate in the research study.

The study is reliable because all of the steps taken by the researcher and the facilitator of the focus groups can be replicated. The focus groups took place at a neutral location to in order to make participants feel comfortable. Both focus groups were asked the exact same set of questions regarding their communication experiences working with their families on the farm. The interaction during the focus group was recorded, which is something that can be replicated.

*Ethics*

In order to protect research participants in this study, ethical considerations were made to accommodate the participants. Since the participants are took part in a focus group and shared their own perceptions and ideas there is a level of risk taking place for these participants. Some of the information shared during the focus group could have potentially become emotional for participants. The risk of sharing their ideas and potentially confidential information regarding their family situation was closely monitored. All participants were informed when they agree to participate in the study, and when the focus group began all information shared remained private and confidential to protect them. In addition to a verbal confidentiality agreement, participants were also asked to sign an informed consent form prior to beginning the study.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the communication taking place within farm families during succession planning but more specifically, the research is focused on intergenerational communication between farm families. Current farm operators and their successors participated in focus groups to discuss their succession planning status and thoughts on day-to-day farm communication.

Data Analysis

The researcher used five questions to help determine statistical information about the research participants. After these five questions were complete, the research began with the focus group interaction, which are discussed in Chapter 3 and displayed in appendix A. Participant verbal communication was recorded. Upon completion of focus groups, the researcher analyzed the data based on each question asked during the focus groups. Information was transcribed and compared between the two focus groups.

Results of the Study

Demographic Data

Six participants took part in the focus group study. Of the six participants, 3 were current farm operators, and 3 were successors to the farming operation. All of the participants (100%) that took part in this study were male. Three sets of father-son groups participated in the study. The 3 farm operators (fathers) reported they are currently employed by the farm full-time. Two out of the three successors (sons) reported they are currently working full-time on the farm with their fathers. The one participant that did not work on the farm full-time was still employed on the farm, but does not work for the farm full-time.
All of the farmers interviewed had multiple farms in various locations in Illinois. These farms were all in Champaign and Vermilion counties. The farm operators farmed 800-1500 acres of farmland. All farm operators had more than 30 years of professional farming experience, not including the years they all spent growing up on the farm job shadowing. The farm successors reported they had been involved with the farming operation their entire lives, but for the two successors who currently work on the farm did not report becoming active until they turned 16, when they were eligible to receive their Illinois driver’s license.

Focus Group Responses

*Communication on the Farm with Family Members*

The first question asked during the focus groups was: List all of the ways you communicate with family members while working on the farm. The first focus group conducted consisted of farm successors, or sons of the family farm operation. The participants verbally listed off their responses. The responses that the successors (sons) reported were: using the phone, yelling to hear over load equipment, CB radios, walkie talkies, swearing, and using hand signals. Everyone agreed that most of the communication with each other is verbal communication, except when they are working in the field.

The second focus group conducted was with the current farm operators or the fathers of the sons in the first focus group. The farm operators (fathers) answered this same question. Some of the ways they report they communicate with each other while working on the farm are: hand signals, cell phones, FM radios, walkie-talkies and nonverbal communication. Father A shared that cell phones have replaced a lot of the
nonverbal communication they once used while working on the farm. He stated that when he and his dad worked together back in the 1980’s all they used was nonverbal signals, except for when the CB radio was invented and they began using that method as a primary means. Now he said they primarily use cell phones. Father C indicated he tends to use a lot of nonverbal means while he is working. He stated, “The more you work with some people, the less you need to communicate with each other. You just begin to learn how to work with each other and pay attention then the need for constant interaction goes away”.

This specific response works to answer the research question: What does the family find works best when communicating with one another? Father C does not acknowledge a need for communication while working together, and he would prefer to work with people who understand what they are supposed to do and they just do it. He does not feel there needs to be constant interaction while working together. This response shows families are not communicating with each other. If a family does not communicate with something as important as working in the fields, which is a dangerous job, why would a family see a need to communicate about succession planning? If communication is not welcomed into the work environment, even when discussing day-to-day operations, then it is difficult for families to find a time to talk about important business matters, such as succession planning.

More nonverbal communication took place during this focus group than with the first group. The facilitator was asked to clarify what nonverbal communication meant by a participant. When the facilitator described nonverbal communication, the participant then jokingly gave the middle finger as an example of what he believed nonverbal
communication to mean. Everyone in the group laughed it off and was not upset by the gesture. Participants also used hand gestures to describe how they use hand signals on the farm to back up vehicles.

**Family Discussion of Farm-Related Business Matters**

The second question focus group participants were asked was: How does your family discuss important farm-related business matters? During focus group one, which was made up of the successors (sons), son C said, “Basically, dad says we’re doing this and I say okay”. Son B disclosed that he usually has to tell his dad what to do because he comes up with some crazy ideas of how to do things. In addition son B stated, “The younger generation has better ideas than these 1980’s people” when he described business decision with his father. Also, son A said that his family usually sits down face-to-face to discuss projects or purchases that need to be done. Son A said they usually do these discussions over dinner at his parent’s home. Son A also shared that his family likes to delegate some big decision tasks up (i.e., buying seed and fertilizer) so that one person does the research and makes the decision.

The farm operators (fathers) reported that the way they communicate farm-related business depends on the people they are working with. For instance, when they are meeting with landlords they farm with they typically sit down face-to-face because there is often paperwork that needs to be signed. If they are meeting with their children (successors) they often discuss business in passing and do not set up a formal time to meet and talk about the farm. Father B described talking to their kids about the farm as “whenever a conversation strikes up”. Fathers A and C said most of the time communication about the farm with these families takes place when they are out in the
shed working or when they come in for the night from working they begin having in-depth conversations about the farm.

Challenges Encountered with Family Members

Research participants were asked: What are some of the challenges you encounter when communicating with family members. During the focus group, son A disclosed that it is difficult to communicate with family members because if there is a conflict, he still has to live with them because they are your family. Son A said, “you cannot always say what you want because family will get upset and it will ruin relationships” Son B said that he finds it difficult to work with his dad because his dad always seems to want to do things the “hard way”, and he often sees an easier or better way to do things around the farm.

The farm managers (fathers) were asked the same question during their focus group. Some of the issues they feel come up when communicating with one another is disagreements. Father A said that he has two boys who he’ll be leaving his farm to and it is difficult to get them to agree upon issues sometimes because they can both be very stubborn at times. Father C indicated that miscommunication about personal lives is a problem he runs into. He feels like it is harder to work with others because he is working around his son’s personal life and things going on in it, such as his family. Father B elaborated on this issue sharing that he knows in-law situations can get very complicated in some people’s businesses because people do not understand the long hours and time that farming entails. When father A shared he has issues with family disagreements on his farm, all of the fathers shook their heads in agreement with him.

Generational Differences in Family Farm Business
Research participants were asked: Do you feel there is a generational difference in how farm business is handled? Please describe. All of the sons from focus group one were in agreement that there is a definite change in how farming is done now versus when their fathers and grandfathers were starting out. The main difference they all agreed upon was that farming has a larger technology aspect than it did ever before. Son B said, “If you aren’t working with technology, you might as well get out because you are going to be too far behind”. Son A thinks technology gives farmers more hard evidence to make decisions about the business because all of the records are stored electronically regarding the farm. Son C said technology allows farmers to see patterns of what happens in farm business to better predict what the future will hold.

Fathers were asked the same question as their sons regarding generational differences in farm business. The biggest difference they see between the generations is that the younger generation has never experienced a bad farming year where the farm did not make money and had to declare a loss. During their lifetimes many of them have not experienced this first hand and do not understand how bad it can get when farming does not make money. Due to not having a bad farming year, they do not know what it is like to be turned down by a banker when the money runs out and the business still has to run. Not only did all these farmers report they have personally experienced a bad farming year, they also said they remember their parents discussing the Great Depression and other terrible farming years with them so they know what it is like to struggle.

Another topic the fathers say is different between their generation and their father’s generation of farming is the amount of money they are working with. Father A reported that since inflation is so high and farm prices are rising lately, he believes it is
almost scary how much money they are in charge on managing on their farms. To elaborate on this idea, another father B shared he believes it would be difficult to work in farming if he did not have a business mind and were not comfortable working with accounting techniques because so much of farming is a business, bookkeeping job. All of the fathers believe that farming is much more complicated than it was for their parents due to tax laws and the records they have to keep for the government.

*Steps Taken to Prepare for Farm Succession*

The last question asked to the focus groups was: What steps has your farm business or family taken to prepare for a succession transfer? During the first focus group session the successors discussed that the specifics of how the farm will be divided up between siblings and other family members had not been discussed yet. However, all of them did indicate they knew they would be taking over the daily operations of managing the farm. Son A indicated that he is currently helping make decisions with their farm operation. Son A also said that even though his father is on all the legal documents for the farm, he is slowly beginning to let him and his brother make decisions for the farm’s future. The sons B and C said that they were not actively making decisions yet, but were helping out with work on the farm. Son C said that he and his dad do not really discuss matters like this and the way it will probably work in his family is that one-day it will all just be dumped in his lap, so he has to be prepared. Son C said it is hard to judge what his dad will do when the time comes to turn over the farm.

The second focus group made up of (fathers) was asked the same question as their sons regarding preparing for a succession transfer. Father B stated that he has not done anything to prepare for succession transfer, other than turning basic responsibilities over
to his son. Fathers A and C have initiated conversations with their lawyers and started thinking about how they are going to pass on their farms. Two out of the three fathers said they have begun passing down some daily operations and bigger decisions onto their kids. Father A even indicated that he “kicks back” and lets his kids to all of the big stuff and he just basically supervises them. Father C, who has not turned over any responsibilities to his children, indicated he is mentally and businesswise trying to prepare himself for retirement, but he knows the farm is something he is not even close to letting go of responsibilities. They all agreed based on the discussion that it is something they cannot do enough to prepare for and it is something that is very important to the family and livelihood of the farm.

Discussion

This research study seeks to find answers regarding intergenerational communication in farm families during the succession planning process. Three research questions guide the research process while conducting focus groups with farm families. These three questions are: 1) What does the family find works best when communicating with one another, 2) What are some of the main problems the family reports when communicating with one another, and 3) How does the family alter their communication when communicating with each other. The discussion section of the paper will be divided into answering each of these research questions based up findings from focus groups and applying the found information to the communication accommodation theory.

*What does the family find works best when communicating with one another?*

To answer this research question, the focus group participants were asked to list all of the ways they communicate while working on the farm. For the sons of the family,
they reported that using verbal communication is the primary way they like to communicate. More specifically, using cell phones is the main avenue family members communicate with each other when working.

The second focus group made up of fathers reported they primarily use the cell phone to communicate. Father C stated that the longer you work with some people, the less you have to communicate. He said that everyone just learns how to work together, and you just do it. Based on what the fathers and sons said, communication accommodation theory (CAT) can be applied to better explain the communication taking place. This theory states that one of the basic principles of CAT is that communication is based on immediate need (Whaley and Samter, 2009). When working together on the farm situations arise where communication must be altered based on immediate need. Farm families do not predetermine how and what style of communication they will use when working on-the-job, they just use whatever means necessary at the time of immediate need.

The key to having a healthy working relationship while working together as a family on the farm is to maintain communication, however one of the families indicated they are not communicating at all while working together. Father C said the longer you work with some people, the less you have to communicate. An indicator of dysfunctional conflict is decreased communication. When families are not communicating with each other it leads to conflict, which complicates the working relationship, ultimately complicating succession planning. When succession planning is complicated it can affect the livelihood of the family’s farm business, but more importantly the well-being and long-term health of the family unit as a whole.
Remembering ethical guidelines is crucial to maintaining healthy family relationships too. In chapter 2 W.D. Ross’ 6 Basic Ethical duties were discussed. These duties are: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice, beneficence and self-improvement. Family members must remember these ethical guidelines when working in business together. Ethical guidelines will improve the communication and overall well-being of the family unit because they are commonsense morality that helps teach people how to treat one another. These 6 rules are basic life skills each family member should abide and will help improve family communication.

Sons B and C indicated that whatever their dad says, goes, when it comes to operating the farm and making decisions. When a party is inflexible and unwilling to listen to the other parties involved this also shows dysfunctional conflict. By the father avoiding communication with his family while working it shows he is accommodating his communication style. When he alters communication it forces others in the family to change their communication habits to accommodate him in return. When families accommodate and alter their communication to avoid conflicts while working on the farm it creates more tension and problems than if they would communicate openly and honestly about farm business.

What are some of the main problems the family reports when communicating with one another?

Both focus groups reported very different communication problems while working together. The sons said one of the main issues they find when communicating with family members is that even if they disagree or get in a fight with family while working together, they are still your family and they have to learn to get along with them.
Unlike friends or someone outside of your immediate family where they could avoid the person they were upset with, they cannot do this with your family, especially if they must work together. Also, son C reported that his father does things his way and if they disagree with him there is nothing they can do about it. The farm is managed by the dad and ideas are his way, or the highway.

The effects of conflict in family business versus non-family businesses (i.e., farms) is more complex because families must take into account the psychodynamic relationship that exists within the family when working through conflicts (Kellermans & Eddleston, 2004). These research participants wanted to avoid conflict with their family members as much as possible, but avoiding conflicts was creating conflicts within the family. Avoiding conflicts and discussions about topics does not help families move forward in their succession planning process and instead it only leads to more conflicts. One way family members created conflicts through communication is by creating social distance. Communication accommodation can act as a barometer of social distance (Whiley & Samter, 2009). Social distance is often shown as a source of power for individuals. When family members change their communication styles to command social distance, this is a sign of accommodation. From what the successors (sons) had indicated about their own struggles with their fathers, this shows the father is trying to command social distance via communication accommodation. The father makes it difficult for the son to communicate with him by altering his communicative style to being very non-negotiable and short with his child. Fathers are altering their communication subconsciously to accommodate their own needs and not have to give up power or control of the farm business.
How does the family alter their communication when communicating with each other?

The focus groups did not directly show that farm families alter their communication when working together. Based upon the responses that the sons gave versus the answers their fathers gave can prove that the family does alter their communication when discussing issues. Focus group participants were asked if they felt there is a generational difference in how farm business is handled. The group made up of sons reported they felt their fathers wanted to always do things the hard way, or they were not willing to step forward into newer ways of farming. Some of the ways the successors worded their answers could have been potentially offensive to their fathers, such as “it’s not 1801 anymore, and we need to remind Dad of that”.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the fathers reported that their sons did not understand how bad farming can be because they have never experienced a year where money was lost due to poor crops or a bad market. The farm has always made money since they have been alive. The fathers also felt they had a good understanding of how their parents did business on the farm, and believe they have it harder today than their parents did because there is a lot more money to work with.

One inference that can be made about the differences in generational communication on the farm can be related to convergence and divergence. Convergence and divergence are directly related to CAT because they describe the amount and type of communication people have with one another (Whaley & Samter, 2009). Convergence is related to people wanting to seek approval from one another. The successors (sons) are responsible for convergence in this relationship. Even though they are not happy with how their fathers run some aspects of the farm, they are not willing to speak up because
they do not want to upset their fathers. It is easier to just go with the flow and let the dad do what he wants, even if it is not necessarily best for the farm. Although convergence helps eliminate conflict and makes the father perceive competent, it can also lead to frustration and lack of social identity for the successor.

Divergence is another aspect of CAT. This is when a communicator precisely makes their opinions and ideas distinctive and different from others (Whaley & Samter, 2009). The farm operators (fathers) are guilty of divergence. Due to history repeating itself, their parents more than likely had the same experiences that they are having with their children with succession planning. The fathers said that they have more money and responsibilities with the farm than their parents did. Although this might be true, and some aspects of business are more complicated today, the conflicts and disagreements that families have about responsibilities on the farm are not all that different.

Interindividual communication is an aspect of divergence communication. This is something noticed with both of the focus groups. The sons changed their communication talking about their fathers with their peers from when they discuss business with their fathers. Likewise, the fathers change their communication talking to their sons about farm business from the way they talk to their peers and friends. The sons admittedly said they cannot talk to their dads about certain ideas because they would not understand, and they would not even know how to bring it up to them. The fathers said they are not ready to turn things over to their sons who are “not ready” to handle the farm operation.

The most common theme this research study displayed is that intergenerational communication regarding succession planning is not taking place in farm families. Communication between generations is not taking place because there are major
differences in ideas of how the farm should be working and both sides have not reached an agreement. Some of the problems families ran into when discussing the farm is that most of the families have not started the succession planning process because they do not know how to begin the conversation, or where to start with the planning. Prior research shows that succession planning for farms is both communicatively and economically a little researched area (cite).
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES & CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

Even though the research study was well prepared, there are still limitations and shortcomings of the study. The first limitation of this study was the time limit allotted to complete this thesis. If more time had been allowed to complete the research, a larger sample would have been taken of the population possibly allowing for a more in-depth analysis of farm families. The lack of research participants in this study was also a shortcoming of the study. The time period when the focus groups were conducted (late March-early April) is a busy time of year for most farmers since they are preparing for spring planting season. If focus groups would have been held during the winter or summer months there could have been a better chance of attracting a larger, more diverse group to participate in the study.

The most significant limitation of this study was the lack of research in this area. There is very little research done on farm family communication during succession planning. Research exists discussing why succession planning is important in family farms and family businesses, but how the succession planning process is carried out has not been widely studied. One study that was found focused on conflict communication among farm family members. This study was focused on looking at intergenerational communication within the farm families to better understand the communication between family members across generations.

The last area this study could have improved upon was to broaden the diversity of the research participants chosen. The participants chosen were from Central Illinois and the primary crops they grew were corn, soybean and wheat. All of these families were
from the same geographical area and had known each other their entire lives. The research may have shown different results if the participants did not personally know each other, and if the farmers were from different geographical areas. Different geographical areas and crops grown may have provided a broader intergenerational farm family perspective.

Further Study & Recommendations

Family farming is one of the oldest occupations in the world, however the study of the farm family as a unit is not an area that has been widely studied. Succession planning is something farm families are faced with every year and application of communication research to farm families going through the succession process is an area that needs to be elaborated on. Research has been conducted on the business practices of the family farm and also the business aspect of succession planning both within family business and family farming. An area of research that is the missing and could assist families properly prepare for succession transfer is communication skills. To be more specific, intergenerational communication in family business needs to be research more in-depth to help families understand the communication mistakes being made.

Researching the role gender plays on farm family communication could also play an important role. By default, this research study only gathered male participants. Looking at the roles females play in farm family communication could be beneficial. In addition, using a different research method, or altering the current research method used could be beneficial to future developments. Interviewing families together, and including all members of the family may give different, more beneficial results.
Development of a farm family communication plan or program could also assist these family members in the succession planning process. If the family had guidelines of how to communicate with each other, it could help them understand what they should be doing to avoid roadblocks during the process. Possibly developing a class for families to attend to help them with not only communication techniques, but also learning the basics of succession planning from a legal and financial perspective could be useful too.

Conclusion

This research study aimed to evaluate the intergenerational communication within farm families who were going through succession planning. Upon conducting a full review of current literature available on communication in farm families, farm family succession planning, and intergenerational communication in farm families the results showed the literature was scarce and lacking in many areas. In order to find information to support the research, family business communication was studied and the areas of intergenerational farm family communication and succession planning were broken down into subgroups to help organize the available research.

Upon determining the areas of research that have already been conducted three research questions were developed to help guide the process. Once research questions were developed focus group research methods were conducted with current farm operators and their successors. Focus groups revealed that families are not talking to one another and communicating about not only the succession planning process, but also the day-to-day operations around the farm. Realizing families are not communicating with one another while working together on the farm has found that more research needs to be conducted on the reasons why family members are not communicating. It is impossible to
evaluate the *how* of communication among farm families, without explaining the *why* for lack of communication happening.

This study worked to apply communication accommodation theory (CAT) to the current communication taking place within the families. Upon conducting research it was determined these families are avoiding communication with each other. The parents and children are accommodating their own communicative styles to avoid conflicts within the family. The family believes all conflicts are bad, so avoiding communication is the solution to the problem. Avoiding communication is creating more problems for families than the conflicts would have created if they were addressed.

Looking back to the philosophical discussion in Chapter 2, W.D. Ross’ six duties which serve as conditional behavior for all humans is applies to the research study. To reiterate, these six basic duties are: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, justice beneficence and self-improvement. All six of the basic duties relate to intergenerational communication in farm families. If these families acknowledge and apply these duties to their lives, it would help improve communication within the family, resulting in a less chaotic succession planning process. Each member of the family must work on bettering themselves, and improving their own communication style before they can expect a change within the family.

The research findings indicated that farm family members are not communicating with each other, and in return it is complicated the succession planning process. Not only are these family members not communicating about their succession plans, but they are not communicating about day-to-day operations of the farm. All of the families who
participated in the focus groups experienced problems communicating while working together.

One of the main communication problems was the lack of communication taking place. Farm operators expected the successors to just understand what needed to be done without communicating. Also, successors were not communicating to the farm operators their desire and want to take over more responsibility, or at least to be informed of the decisions being made with the farm.

The research has found that farm families are either not communicating with each other, or the communication is minimal in many areas of the farm business. If families can acknowledge there are issues with communication and work to change their personal behaviors, it would improve the family farm succession planning process, and the farm business as a whole. Family members must be proactive and willing to learn how to improve communication in their family farm business to improve and move forward with succession planning.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Focus Group Research Questions

1. List all of the ways you communicate with family members while working on the farm?

2. How does your family discuss important farm-related business matters?

3. What are some of the challenges you encounter when communicating with family members?

4. Do you feel there is a generational difference in how farm business is handled? Please describe.

5. What steps have your farming business or family taken to prepare for a succession transfer?