

Making Family Decisions in Farming and Ranching

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Introduction

Some of the most pressing concerns faced by couples or families today relate to making decisions about work and family. Nearly every family must consider such issues as economic security, job satisfaction, career development, family togetherness, and quality of life. Specific decisions may involve pursuit of educational goals, transition from one career to another, relocation, a husband or wife taking a second job, impact of job difficulties on the marriage or family, child care arrangements, and other matters. Agricultural challenges in North Dakota have placed many families in the position of making critical decisions about farming, financial security, and family well-being that will carry long-term consequences. Questions to help the decision-making process include:

What is the issue or concern that we need to make a decision about?

What are the values that will guide us in setting goals related to work and our family?

What are the resources we should consider in making our decision?

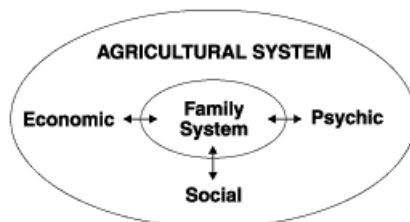
What are the costs and benefits involved in making this decision? To each of us individually? To us as a couple? To us as a family?

What decision-making process will work best for us in this circumstance?

Understanding the Concern

Family decisions in farming or ranching involve two closely linked systems, the **family** and the **farm or ranch operation**. Figure 1 shows the linkages between the farm or ranch and the family. At least three linkages between the family and the farm or ranch operation have an influence on family decisions.

Figure 1. Family and farm/ranch linkages.



First, the family and farm/ranch operation are linked **economically**, because the family gets a portion of its economic well-being from the farm or ranch, and the farm or ranch is continued as an economic entity by the family's efforts. Specific decisions for the family related to this linkage might include how to spend money to support the family, or if a family member should take an off-farm job.

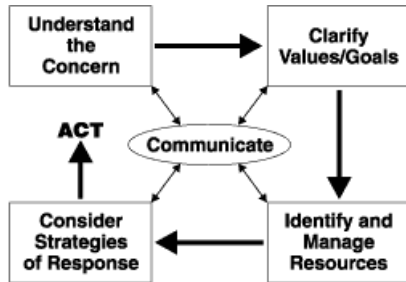
Second, the family and farm/ranch operation are linked **socially**, because the family's social life and interaction is tied to the rhythms of farm or ranch life, and the farm's well-being and operation is determined by the family. Decisions for the family related to this tie may include how family time is spent together (or not), what values and patterns are taught to children, and even when a person gets married!

Third, these two systems are linked **mentally** or **psychically**, because a family member's sense of identity and personal meaning is often

... tied to the farm or ranch as a way of life, and the farm's functioning is affected by the way family members feel about and care for the land. Family decisions related to this linkage might include how to avoid feeling less competent if the farm faces troubles, or whether to continue farming for the next generation.

Families in farming and ranching need to consider the context of a decision, and then think about the most effective way to approach the issue. A process that families can follow in making their decisions is given in Figure 2 and then discussed.

Figure 2. Family decision making process.



Key Question:

What is the issue or concern that we need to make a decision about?

Identifying Your Key Values and Goals

To reach the goals that you desire for you and your family, it is important to determine those values which are most important to you and which will help to set goals that reflect your priorities in life. **Values** are those fundamental beliefs and priorities you hold about what is of most worth and importance in your life. Families tend to be more happy and successful when they have shared values and goals. Each family's goals and values may be somewhat different. The important thing is for families, especially marital partners, to think through, discuss, and agree upon what values will guide their lives. Having shared values and goals creates unity. It also becomes a source of strength that is vital as families encounter problems and crises. Values guide our most basic decisions, and provide a standard to follow.

The decisions that we make, the way we use our time, and the things we spend money on are all influenced by the values that we have. Making decisions about work and family life can be facilitated by identifying key values and setting goals that reflect those values. For example, a deeply held value may link to a specific goal, such as:

Family Unity (value) - - - - - Weekly Family Activity (goal)

Economic Security (value) - - - - - Retirement Planning (goal)

It is critical to identify what really matters to you and then set goals that help you spend time, energy, and money on those things that are truly important. Sometimes we give time or effort to things that will bring the least reward in terms of what we really value. You may, as someone has said, "Climb the ladder of success only to find that it was leaning against the wrong wall." This can be avoided by identifying your values and then evaluating whether your goals reflect those values. For example, a family may value financial well-being but not set goals to follow a family budget regularly. Use the following Values Exercise to help you.

Key Question:

What are the values that will guide us in setting goals related to work and our family?

Values Exercise

Identifying values

1. Answer this question. What do I believe are the five most important things for the well-being of myself and my family?
2. List the values decided on. Take time to sit down and compare them with those listed by other family members, especially your spouse. Work to develop a list of shared values as a couple and a family.
3. Discuss the values you have listed and decide which things are negotiable and which are non-negotiable.

Setting goals

4. Develop a list of goals based on the values you have listed and divide them into short-term (three to six months or less than one year), medium (one to five years), and long-term (more than five years) goals. You may also divide them into personal, family, or work goals.
5. Write your goals down and make them as specific and clear as possible. Refer back to them as often as needed as you make decisions about work and family.

Managing Resources to Reach Desired Goals

After identifying values and setting goals, another important component of decision making is managing resources to pursue and reach desired goals. **Resources** have been defined as "what the family has or can create to get what it wants," and may take a variety of forms. Some resources are more abstract and intangible, such as intelligence, creativity, optimism, cooperation, agreement, responsibility, and trust, yet they are critical to achieving many goals. Other resources may be more concrete and tangible, such as money, land, labor, capital, equipment, skills, education, or physical materials. Some of the resources unique to the family include parental love, family ties, sibling closeness, generational obligations, and marital commitment. Family members must make decisions about how to allocate their time and use of resources in ways that will help them to reach desired goals.

It is important for family members to **identify** and then **evaluate** the resources that are most important to them in pursuing their values and goals. Research on resources that are considered to be important in work-family decisions has led to the model shown in Table 1. A resource may be anywhere on a continuum from highly personal (such as personal esteem) to highly interpersonal (such as extensive family interaction). Some important resources may be very concrete (such as money) while others may be abstract but very important (such as autonomy). Some of the most critical resources in these categories are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Important resources in work-family decisions.

Resource	Personal	Interpersonal
Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autonomy• Personal growth• Personal esteem• Level of stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responsibility• Commitment• Quality of life• Care of children• Stability• Stress on family
Concrete	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Job satisfaction• Education• Career development• Work environment• Money• Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family interaction• Home environment• Providing• Housing/benefits• Time together• Money

These are the types of resources identified as important by family members in making decisions about work and family. In the specific context of farming as a family business, there may well be additional resources that individuals can be helped to identify as being important in their particular circumstances. These might include preservation of family heritage, family expectations, and creating a future for the next generation. These should also be identified and evaluated as to their importance in considering how to make the best decision.

Try the following Resource Discussion Questions as you make your decision.

Key Question:

What are the resources we should consider in making our decision?

Resource Discussion Questions

1. Are the resources most important to you in reaching a certain goal more personal (self-oriented) or interpersonal (couple- or family - oriented)?
2. Are the resources most important to you in reaching a desired goal more concrete (tangible) or abstract (intangible)?
3. What other resources might you identify or create that could be helpful? Are they easy or difficult to access? Do they cost money? Do they require effort to develop?

Costs and Benefits in Making a Decision

It is useful to ask the following questions when faced with a critical decision related to work and the family.

Key Questions:

What are the costs and benefits involved in making this decision? To each of us individually? To us as a couple? To us as a family?

A common part of successful decision making involves evaluation of the costs and benefits to the individuals, the couple, and the family that will result from a given course of action. **Costs** generally refer to a decrease in what a person or family values, such as less autonomy or economic security. **Benefits** generally refer to an increase in those things that are valued, such as increased time together or better personal esteem. Any decision usually involves both benefits and costs, but the key is to minimize costs and maximize benefits that occur as a result of any decision. Sometimes families must consider for themselves at what point certain costs outweigh the benefits that come to their family as a result of a certain course of action. For example, if a husband decides to take a second job is the increased financial gain (+) and/or job benefits (+) sufficient to overcome the cost of lessened physical health (-) or reduced family interaction (-)? Husbands and wives, parents and children, and other family members, by communicating with each other, can evaluate the costs and benefits involved in a decision and how it will affect their family life and well-being.

For the individual

When considering costs and benefits it may be valuable to consider each individual family member affected by the decision. Each individual in the family may have specific needs and desires, as well as needs that agree with the family's needs as a whole.

Research shows that both husbands and wives pay attention to the individual benefits resulting from a particular family or work decision. The most common benefit both men and women suggest is important for wives is personal satisfaction. Women tend to consider their personal satisfaction more highly when evaluating how satisfied they are in family relationships. Couples may want to consider how a particular decision will impact on the wife's personal satisfaction or other important areas. Another important benefit often considered for individuals, especially for husbands, is career development and job satisfaction. Men may be reluctant to leave a particular area of employment because they feel that there will be a cost in their job satisfaction. This can be particularly true in farm families, where farming as a career has been carried on for generations and men feel competent in their abilities. Couples should think carefully about how a decision will impact career development or job satisfaction for either husband or wife.

Often individuals may be more attentive to the personal costs of a work-family decision than the costs to their partner. Husbands and wives need to allow for discussion of their own perceptions so that there is understanding of the other's feelings about what the cost of a decision might be. The most common personal costs that individuals tend to consider include reduced time, increased stress, and for women, reduced esteem.

Parents must also consider how their children will be affected by a decision about work and family concerns. This may be a particularly difficult issue in farming families where issues of transferring the farm from one generation to another might be at stake, or when both parents and adult children are involved in making a decision. Some of the benefits that seem important for children in making a work-family decision are increased time, more family interaction, family stability, and good care of the children. Wives tend to be more attentive to consideration of these issues for children in the family, and should encourage husbands in addressing this area.

For the couple

Husbands and wives should spend some time discussing the costs and benefits that come to them as a married couple as a result of any particular decisions. Marital satisfaction tends to be the most common cost or benefit that couples describe, noting that some decisions may result in too great a cost in marital satisfaction. By discussing both the concrete and more abstract interpersonal resources that may be affected by a decision, couples can use their values to guide the decision making process. The marital unit tends to be the nucleus of family health and well-being, and couples should take care to consider their needs as husband and wife. If a decision seems to take too great a toll on the marriage relationship, then perhaps it should be re-evaluated and alternative solutions should be considered.

For the family

The most common benefit to a family that family members consider when making a work-family decision is financial gain. This indicates the importance of providing economically for the family as a major consideration in nearly all work-family decisions. Also, the cost most often associated with such decisions by family members is financial loss. While the impact of any decision on the financial security of the family cannot be overlooked, neither should this issue take sole precedence over all other areas. Benefits that can result for the family from a good decision might include: increased time, more family interaction, a better home environment, higher family satisfaction, increased family stability, improved quality of life, and reduced stress on the family.

Cost and benefit evaluation

1. Select three or four possible courses of action that you might decide on in relation to a concern.
2. List each possible decision and then evaluate the costs you perceive on one side and the benefits you perceive on the other side. Do this for all possible decisions and compare.
3. Make a decision using the cost-benefit evaluation to guide your choice.

What's Your Decision-Making Style?

Family members often develop a particular decision making style that affects the process of communication when an important issue is being considered. It may be helpful for a couple or family to think about what their decision making style is like and how it might affect their communication about values, goal setting, and costs and benefits as related to a certain decision. There tend to be three styles that families practice in their decision making: autonomous, mutual, and dominant.

Autonomous families tend to describe their decision making by suggesting that the responsibility for making the decision rests primarily with one marital partner or family member, usually the one who is being most affected by the decision. In other words, the decision rule rests on one family member's autonomy. If a family practices this style there must be room for private thought and exploration of the issue, as well as respect for the person's ability to make a decision that will benefit the family. A family must decide how they communicate about the decision if one of them carries primary responsibility for making it.

Mutual families tend to describe their decision making by suggesting that the responsibility for making the decision is shared jointly and

there is a mutual effort to discuss the options and arrive at a solution. Mutual families tend to emphasize cooperation, teamwork, sharing, and an unwillingness to make a decision that the other partner would not support. Joint discussion, reaching a consensus, and concern for the other person's viewpoint tend to be important in the decision making process for these couples. A family that utilizes this style needs to allow for sufficient open and explicit discussion of an issue and adjustments to one another's point of view.

Dominant families tend to describe their decision making by suggesting that one person, usually the husband or father, is dominant in the relationship when it comes to decision making and the family will follow the decision made by that person. While this pattern tends to be uncommon, it occasionally does occur and requires attentiveness to how well the family seems to function under this type of decision making process.

Key Question:

What decision making process will work best for us in this circumstance?

Conclusion

Farm families in North Dakota currently face many challenges in making decisions about their future that will determine financial security and family well-being. Understanding the values that guide decision making, the resources that are important in reaching desired goals, the costs and benefits to family members when any decision is made, and the decision making style of a family can all contribute to the success or failure of any decision making effort. The ideas in this publication can benefit and provide guidance to farm and ranch families, as well as others, in the decisions that they face every day.

Agricultural challenges in North Dakota have placed many families in the position of making critical decisions about farming, financial security, and family well-being that will carry long-term consequences

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