High Stakes Communication on the Farm: Lessons from Leadership and Personal Growth

Farming is an intricate dance of people, animals, weather, and land, with stakes often as high as the barn rafters. Beyond the hard skills of running a successful operation lies the essential art of communication. Whether discussing finances with a partner, managing a conflict among employees, or negotiating with a supplier, conversations on the farm often carry weighty implications. Drawing insights from **Crucial Conversations** by Grenny et al., **Dare to Lead** by Brené Brown, and **The Four Agreements** by Don Miguel Ruiz, we can explore how farmers can improve communication by separating stories from facts, embracing vulnerability, and fostering mutual respect.

The Power of Facts vs. Stories

One of the core teachings from *Crucial Conversations* is the difference between facts and the stories we tell ourselves about those facts. Facts are observable truths: “The tractor isn’t serviced.” Stories, on the other hand, are our interpretations or assumptions about those facts: “My farmhand doesn’t care about the equipment.” The danger lies in acting on our stories without verifying them, which can escalate conflicts unnecessarily.

Take this example: A farmer notices that an employee hasn’t cleaned the chicken coops as scheduled. The fact is, the task remains incomplete. The story might be, “They’re lazy and unreliable.” Acting on this assumption, the farmer might reprimand the worker harshly, only to discover later that the employee was dealing with a sick child and ran out of time. By addressing the fact first (“I noticed the coops weren’t cleaned. What happened?”), the manager creates space for understanding and problem-solving.

A simple way to avoid conflating facts with stories is to pause and ask yourself: “What do I know for certain?” and “What am I assuming?” This reflective step can prevent misunderstandings that erode trust and morale.

Embracing Vulnerability: Lessons from Dare to Lead

Brené Brown’s *Dare to Lead* emphasizes the importance of vulnerability in creating strong teams and fostering trust. Vulnerability is not about oversharing or appearing weak; it’s about showing up authentically and being open about challenges and uncertainties.

On the farm, vulnerability might look like admitting to your team that a drought is putting financial strain on the operation. Instead of projecting false confidence, sharing the reality invites collective problem-solving. At Maple Wind, with two seasons of catastrophic flooding, we put it to our team “We’re in a tough spot. The flood has reduced our operations by 30%, and we’re going to need everyone’s input to get through this.” This approach not only built trust but empowered our staff to contribute ideas, like adding more production by rehabilitating old chicken tractors and adding an additional batch of birds.

A dairy farmer near us was facing potentially laying off staff during a downturn. Instead of making the decision in isolation, the family held a team meeting to discuss the farm’s financial health. By being transparent and inviting input, they discovered cost-cutting measures that allowed them to retain nearly all their staff. At Maple Wind, we practice open book management, giving workers a glimpse into farm finances and inviting input into big decisions. Vulnerability can turn demoralizing situations into rallying points for the farm.

Applying The Four Agreements

Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements* provides timeless principles that can ground farm communication in clarity and respect. Let's explore how these agreements apply to daily farm life:

1. **Be Impeccable with Your Word** Words carry weight, especially in high-stakes situations. Being impeccable means speaking truthfully and constructively. If a farmhand accidentally damages equipment, saying, "You're always so careless" is neither accurate nor helpful. Instead, addressing the issue with clarity and respect—"This equipment is crucial for our operations. Let's talk about how we can prevent this in the future"—sets a constructive tone.
2. **Don't Take Anything Personally** Farming is rife with external pressures, from market volatility to unpredictable weather. When emotions run high, it's easy to take frustrations personally. For instance, if a customer complains about late delivery of product, the story might be, "They think I'm incompetent." Instead, focusing on the fact—the delivery was late—and seeking solutions keeps the interaction professional and productive.
3. **Don't Make Assumptions** Assumptions can be a breeding ground for conflict. Imagine a situation where a supplier fails to deliver feed on time. The assumption might be, "They don't value my business." Acting on this assumption could strain the relationship. Instead, clarifying the situation ("I noticed the feed delivery is late. Is there an issue we should address?") can uncover the real cause, like a truck breakdown, and lead to understanding and a resolution.
4. **Always Do Your Best** Doing your best does NOT mean striving for perfection; it means consistently putting forth your best effort given the circumstances. Committing to this principle, makes it possible to approach tough conversations with integrity, even if the outcomes aren't perfect. For example, when discussing a failed yield or late payment with a lender, being honest about the situation and outlining proactive steps shows accountability and professionalism.

Turning High-Stakes Moments into Opportunities

High-stakes conversations on the farm often arise when things go wrong: equipment fails, livestock lost to predation, or interpersonal tensions flare. By separating facts from stories, embracing vulnerability, and adhering to principles of respect and clarity, these moments can become opportunities for growth.

An example from Maple Wind involved navigating conflict between two employees. The fact was that one employee felt overburdened with chores. The story they told themselves was, "My coworker is lazy and dumping their work on me." Addressing the situation began with clarifying facts: what tasks were assigned, what was completed, and where the breakdown occurred. By facilitating an open conversation, we were able to uncover that the "lazy" coworker had been helping another team member with a family emergency. This clarity dissolved the tension, and we worked together to adjust workloads.

Building a Culture of Trust and Respect

Strong communication doesn't happen by accident; it requires intention and practice. Here are actionable steps to foster a culture of trust and respect on your farm:

- **Create a safe space for dialogue:** Encourage open conversations where staff or family feel heard and respected. Regular check-ins can help address issues before they escalate.
- **Practice active listening:** Focus on understanding rather than responding. Paraphrase what others say to ensure clarity.
- **Invest in training:** Workshops on conflict resolution and communication skills can pay dividends in team cohesion. It works for families too!

- **Model the behavior you want to see:** Leaders set the tone. Approach challenges with honesty, humility, and a commitment to solutions.

Farming is full of high-stakes moments, but they don't have to lead to conflict or breakdowns. By distinguishing facts from stories, leaning into vulnerability, and applying timeless principles like those in *The Four Agreements*, farmers can turn tough conversations into opportunities for connection and progress. In the unpredictable world of agriculture, clear and compassionate communication is as vital a tool as a tractor or plow—and just as essential to keeping the operation moving forward.