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Moving Forward: Decision Making in Farm Families  
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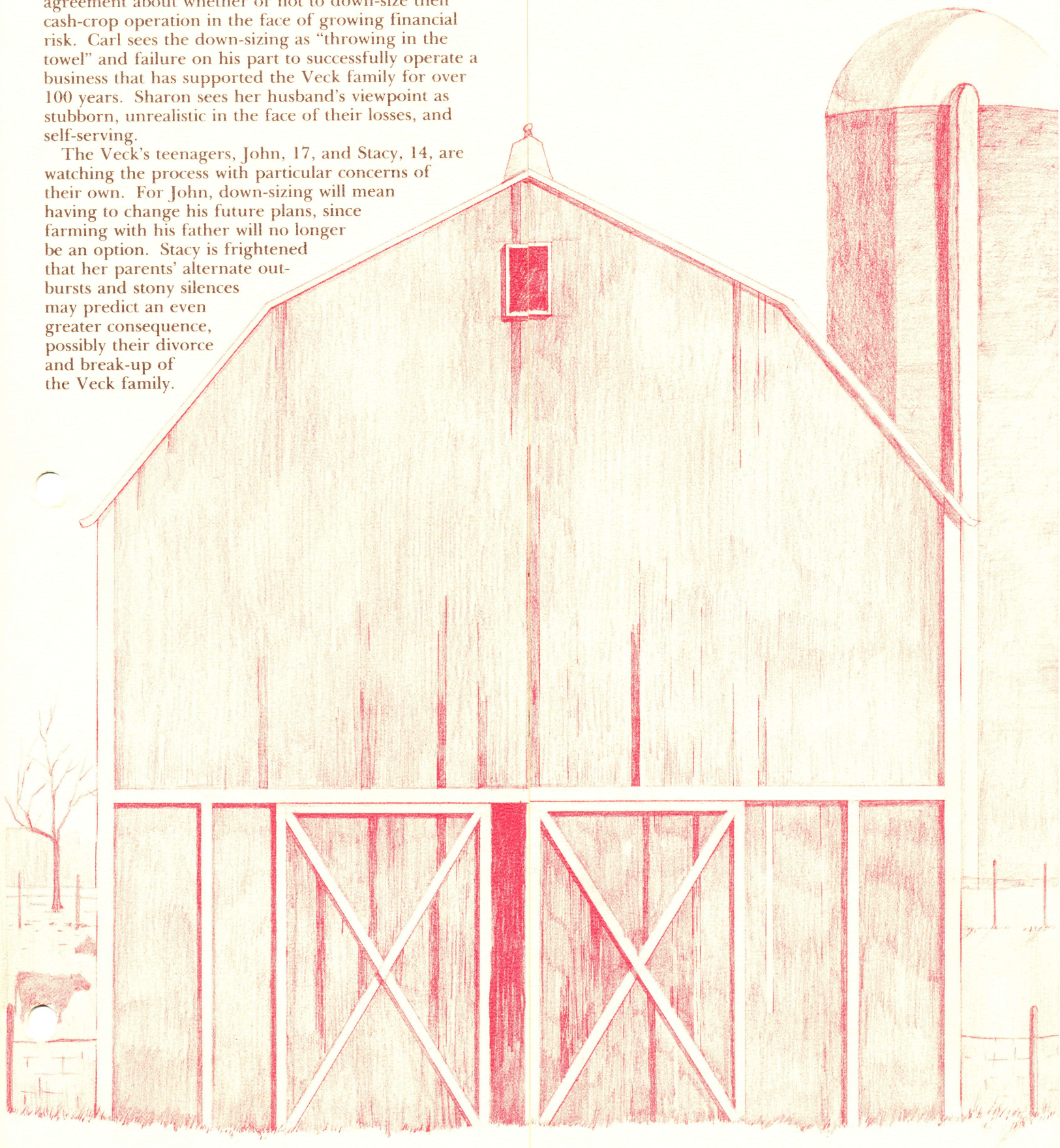
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# MOVING FORWARD: Decision-Making in Farm Families

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Carl and Sharon Veck have made many decisions in the 19 years they have been married but have never been forced to look carefully at the process they have used in arriving at their decisions. This time, things are different: they have been unable to come to any agreement about whether or not to down-size their cash-crop operation in the face of growing financial risk. Carl sees the down-sizing as "throwing in the towel" and failure on his part to successfully operate a business that has supported the Veck family for over 100 years. Sharon sees her husband's viewpoint as stubborn, unrealistic in the face of their losses, and self-serving.

The Veck's teenagers, John, 17, and Stacy, 14, are watching the process with particular concerns of their own. For John, down-sizing will mean having to change his future plans, since farming with his father will no longer be an option. Stacy is frightened that her parents' alternate outbursts and stony silences may predict an even greater consequence, possibly their divorce and break-up of the Veck family.



Many families in agriculture today are being faced with difficult decisions. Their ability to work together to arrive at solutions that are reasonably satisfying to all family members will depend on family behavior patterns they have developed over time. How well they communicate with one another, the extent to which family members are able to influence one another, and past successes or failures they have had will all impact heavily on deciding important family issues.

Families are different than other small groups that come together for a common purpose. Outside groups that become factional and dissatisfied can disband when things get rough. However, families who become factional and dissatisfied may remain in turmoil and unhappiness for years — or finally dissolve. In either case, losses are always more costly for troubled family units — emotionally and economically.

## Factors that Influence Family Decision-Making

Decision-making is the process of reducing discord between the family and its environment as well as between family members. It is only possible when there are at least two or more courses of action to take.

Decision-making within any group, including family groups, is heavily influenced by the power structure of the group, communication patterns, rules that have been enacted, and the roles that are played by various family members.

Healthier families are characterized by fairly equal sharing of power among family members, particularly as children grow older. That is, no one person exercises excess influence when family issues are resolved.

Family communication, a primary component in the decision-making process, is more complex than simply what one family member says to another. Rather, communication is the process of creating and sharing meanings with one another. It involves a wide range of verbal and non-verbal behavior — including facial expressions, eye contact, spacial distance, tone of voice, and movements such as hugs or abrasive gestures.

Family decision-making is also governed by a set of spoken and unspoken rules that, when effective, provide opportunities for family growth and strategies for avoiding conflict. Such rules evolve as families develop set patterns for 1) settling differences with one another (ex. how much and what kinds of force or threat is appropriate and how much negotiation is allowed); 2) distributing family financial resources (ex. economic decisions related to household expenses, farm operation output, and leisure-time allotments); 3) making space allotments (ex. who shares a room with whom, where eating and snacking is allowed, or where personal items can be kept); 4) determining time allocations (ex. when Dad should be left alone or approached, whether Mother will work full-time or only part-time); and 5) contact with systems outside the family system (ex. whether or not the family has religious affiliation or whether children are encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities at school).

Roles played by family members are important in their decisions about how to handle demands they face. These roles are really a collection of all the

rights, duties, attitudes and values that predict a family's reaction to and behavior in any given situation. Some families are very "position" conscious related to the roles played by family members. They are more likely to maintain strict definitions related to the roles that are appropriate, based on age or sex of family members. For example, a wife may work outside the home only if it does not interfere with her other roles as wife and mother. While these role positions may be positive or negative, the maintenance of the role becomes more important than personal needs or circumstances of family members.

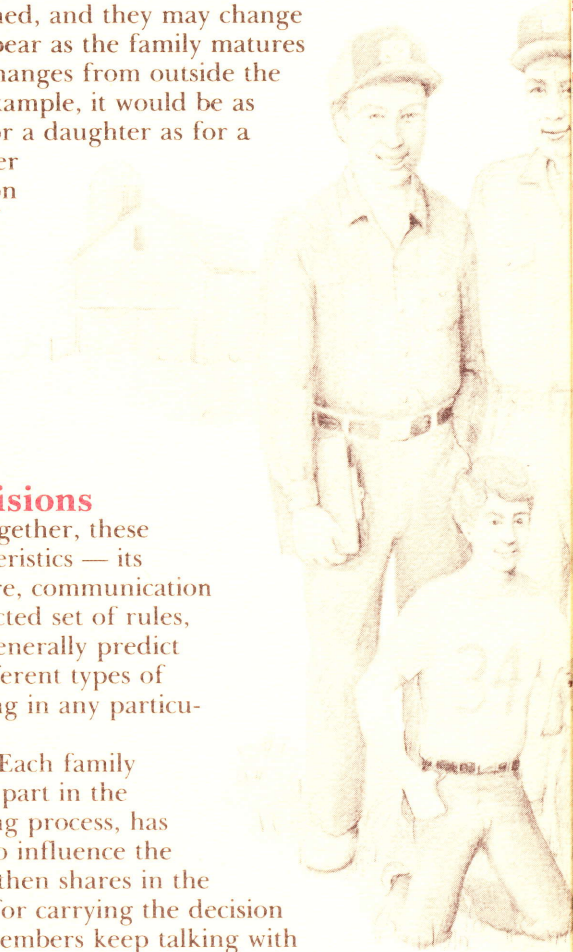
In contrast, other families are characterized as "person" conscious. In these families, roles are not so narrowly defined, and they may change or even disappear as the family matures or adapts to changes from outside the family. For example, it would be as appropriate for a daughter as for a son to take over active operation of the farm, if she were to demonstrate interest and skill in such an endeavor.

## Ways Families Make Decisions

Taken all together, these family characteristics — its power structure, communication strategies, enacted set of rules, and roles — generally predict three very different types of decision making in any particular family:

**Consensus.** Each family member takes part in the decision-making process, has some chance to influence the outcome, and then shares in the responsibility for carrying the decision out. Family members keep talking with one another, remaining flexible and open to possible compromises until they reach a solution that is reasonably acceptable to all involved.

**Accommodation.** This happens when one or more family members simply give up, at least temporarily, because they see little chance of getting what they want — or even a piece of what they want. This decision-making style occurs in families operating primarily with the rule that "the majority or the loudest one wins." More often than not, this encourages family members to line up for or against one another on issues. Usually, less dominant members simply give in through fear or a sense of helplessness about winning. Consequences related to this approach are increased alienation in those members who must accommodate often at the expense of their own growth and development. Feelings of separateness tend to grow between members. As can be expected, this style is highly stress-producing.



**De Facto.** Many families have trouble getting any further in their decision-making than simply defining the problem and brainstorming about what might be done. No plan of action is devised in the group; nor are any responsibilities assigned so that the members work cooperatively toward a solution. In the absence of group action, one member may grow tired of waiting or feel something needs to be done and, thus, make a de facto decision. Reaction of other family members can be highly negative or very positive, depending upon the impact of the outcome on them.

In the long run, however, family life may become either fairly chaotic and unpredictable or largely under the control of a dominant member.

## The Process of Effective Decision-Making

Several sequential steps are required in an effective decision-making process.

In addition, it is helpful to ask certain questions at each step.

### Step 1. Define the Problem

- Does everyone in the family see the problem in the same way?
- Does the family fully

understand the problem or has someone failed to share some important aspect?

- What family values seem to be important in this situation?
- Does the family really have control over what the decision will be or are outside forces — relatives, neighbors, the community — dictating the decision?

### Step 2. Consider all Possible Alternatives

- How many different possible choices can the family think of right now?

• What other possible sources of information, help and guidance could be helpful in the identification of additional options?

- What are the negative and positive consequences that can be foreseen related to each of the alternatives?

### Step 3. Select the Best Alternative

- Can the family feel comfortable choosing one course of action to follow, knowing that there are still others that could be chosen?
- If agreement cannot be reached right now, how long do dissenting members think it will take before they are ready to make a choice?
- What additional information do they need before deciding?
- How does each member feel once the decision has been made?

### Step 4. Carry Out the Decision

- Will all members who made the decision be willing to accept the responsibility for it and the consequences of it?
- What practical plan or activities are required to put the decision into action?
- Which family members are to be responsible for carrying out the plan, and what are their particular responsibilities?
- At what point in time will the effectiveness of the decision be evaluated?
- As a consequence of the decision, what other related decision may need to be considered?

## Managing Conflict and Disagreement: Family Decision-Making

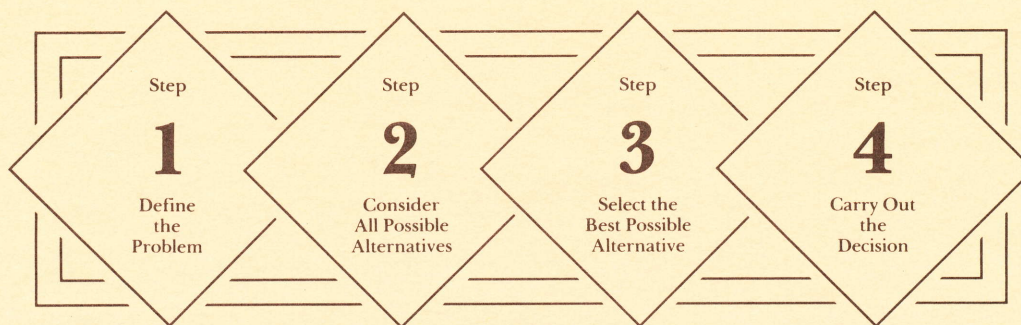
Because family members may differ with respect to goals, lifestyles, values, and emotional investment in trying to work through a particular dilemma or problem, conflict is often inevitable. Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Life Specialist in Nebraska notes that it is more likely to occur when:

- 1) There is a lack of communication. Failure to share ideas and feelings (between wife and husband for example) allows the other person to 'fill in the gap.' We 'read in' what we think the other person will say or anticipate how the other person will respond. Then, we often suspect negative things, provoking anxiety and leading us to look for the worst. If this continues, trust becomes lower, and we may become suspicious and defensive.
- 2) There is a value conflict in which two people have different attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. These differences may interfere in making decisions if we are inflexible and hold rigid, dogmatic beliefs about the 'right way' to do things. Different values and beliefs predispose two people to choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals. And, since each goal requires an investment of time, effort, and some sacrifice, we cannot pursue one goal without sacrificing the other to some extent.
- 3) There is a lack of effective leadership or decision-making. Lack of agreement about 'who's in charge' or 'how we are going to get things done' in a situation can be a source of conflict. For example, if one parent in a family expects democratic decision-making (all members have input) and the other wants to be the boss (do it **my** way), they may not be able to resolve honest differences of opinion. Then, when differences exist, they become sidetracked into a hassle over who will decide or whose opinion is going to be accepted as the 'right' one. The resulting conflict becomes a 'win-lose' struggle.
- 4) Unresolved prior conflict. As the number of past unresolved conflicts increases between people, so does the possibility of future ones. Many people shy away from conflict management because memories of past conflicts still hurt. Probably the more lasting of those scars have been caused by conflicts with those we are closest to — family.



# WORKING TOGETHER IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

## Exercise #1



Try applying the above four steps to the situation below:

Situation: Carl and Sharon Veck have been married for 19 years. They have two children, John, 17, and Stacy, 14. The family farms 200 acres, growing primarily corn and soybeans. They also own a small dairy herd. They have made little or no profit in the past three years and are having a problem getting a loan for spring planting. Sharon has been shouldering the major part of family living expenses by working off the farm as a secretary in the local school system. She has been pressing Carl to get out of agriculture and into something else that will better support the family's needs. Following high school graduation, John has been planning on joining his father full-time in the farming operation, which has been in the Veck family for over 100 years. Stacy is concerned about the growing number of arguments between her parents.

A. State the problem, as each member in the Veck family probably sees it. Think about the personal feelings each member may have related to the issue and how each may be threatened.

B. What are all the possible alternatives that you can imagine in finding a solution for the above problem. List as many as possible in the space provided here:

C. Think about short-range and long-range consequences that might be an outcome of each of the alternatives you have identified. Would any of the alternatives tend to alienate any one of the family members? Would any of the alternatives call for a compromise between one family member and another? If so, what?

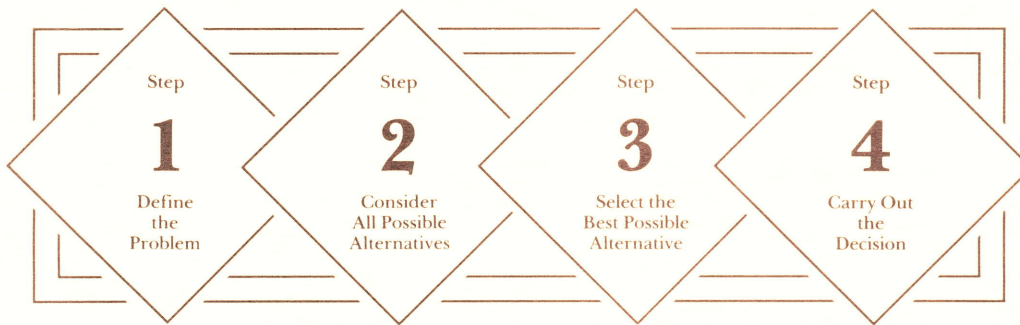
D. How could the Veck family gain more information to help them make a better decision? What kinds of information resources would be available to them if they lived in your community? Could they find additional resources in nearby communities?

E. Given the information you presently have, identify what you believe is the best possible alternative in this situation. List it here and identify two or three reasons why you chose that particular alternative:

F. In order to carry out the decision, list the responsibilities that would be necessary for someone in the family to assume. Who would be the best person in the family to carry out each task? Has any family member been left out or overloaded?

# WORKING TOGETHER IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

## Exercise #2



In exercise #1, you practiced the above steps by working through another family's problem. Now try applying the four steps to a situation in your own family.

Situation (Define a problem in your own family that requires a decision):

A. Have all members in the family state how they see the problem personally and how they feel about it. How do members differ in the way they see the problem or how they feel about it?

B. Brainstorm together to list all the possible alternatives that any member can think of as a possible solution to the above problem. Do not evaluate or judge any of the alternatives at this point. Simply list them.

C. Now go back and look individually at each alternative. What are any positive or negative consequences that members can think of that are related to each alternative?

D. Are there any other sources of information available to the family that can help in identifying other alternatives or in evaluating the advantages or disadvantages of selecting a particular alternative? List these.

E. Given the information that the family presently has, try to come to some consensus about what the best possible alternative might be in this situation. What kinds of compromises might be reached so that all family members are reasonably satisfied and supportive of one of the alternatives? Identify here the family's decision:

F. Now, list the tasks that will be necessary in order to carry out the above decision. Identify the particular family member who will be responsible for each task.

G. Identify a time frame for completing the above tasks and when the family will come together to evaluate the effectiveness of the above decision.



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