

A place for women

Yes, many women are making progress on the farm.
But not enough women, and not fast enough

By Helen Lammers-Helps

Women may have been the first farmers, but it has been a long trek to climb to the top in today's agriculture. Finally, however, women are making progress.

Census data show between 10 and 20 per cent of farms are operated by women. Plus, on many more farms, women are key players taking on the marketing, accounting, human resources, herd management, and other essential roles.

Advances in technology mean there's less need for brute strength in farming, and the trend towards larger farm operations is opening up more opportunities for women to take on leadership positions.

But that doesn't mean the battle has been won.

Too often, women still aren't able to work to their full potential on the farm, says farm family coach Elaine Froese of Boissevan, Man. As someone who works closely with farm families, Froese sees daughters overlooked as potential successors solely because of their gender. She has also seen cases where women are actively involved in farm operations but their opinions aren't valued, and she sees daughters-in-law who have no voice except through their husbands.

"And if the husband is passive, then they don't have a voice at all," says Froese, who quickly adds

her core belief: "Everyone involved in the farm should have a voice at the table and work collaboratively."

Success in farming requires making the best use of farm resources, Froese says, and that includes the human resource, regardless of gender.

Every farmer might agree this is true, yet too often we behave counterproductively without even being aware of the messages we're sending. For example, the language we use is important, says Lew Bayer, a trainer with the Civility Experts. "Language in the workplace needs to be respectful," Bayer says. That means not referring to grown women as "girls," "gals," "skirts," or "little ladies" or making disparaging comments about women being "too emotional."

Bayer recommends following the 4E Philosophy: "Everyone gets Exactly the same respect in Every situation Every time."

This also means avoiding disrespectful non-verbal signals. These include dismissive gestures such as eye rolling, holding up your hand in a "full-stop" motion or using a condescending tone of voice.

TURNING THE TABLES

For women who don't feel they are getting equal respect, Bayer recommends learning how to assert yourself without being aggressive. Doing nothing is not the solution, she says. "Silence is considered permission."

Women who want to be taken seriously can sometimes be their own worst enemies, Bayer explains. "If you want to be taken seriously, don't take brownies to the office or offer to head up the decorating committee."

Also insist on opportunities to upgrade your skills. This past December, 240 women travelled to Chicago for the third Executive Women in Agriculture conference. The No. 1 thing those women wanted was more information on risk management, says conference organizer, Jeanne Bernick.



To that degree, it was the same as any general farm conference. But their second choice was different. It was for more information on professional development, particularly leadership skills. “They want to have their voices heard,” explains Bernick.

Not surprisingly, these women are also interested in work-life balance issues, like dealing with aging parents and childcare.

Conference attendance has been growing and Bernick says another conference is planned for 2014. More and more women are taking on key decision-making roles in agriculture, she says. For example, 50 per cent of Iowa farmland is owned by women. More women are returning to the farm in management roles, she adds, or are continuing to operate the farms after their husbands have died.

YOUR RIGHT TO BE THERE

In addition to coaching, Froese farms with her husband. She admits she has found herself as the only woman at an agricultural meeting on occasion. “Women need to make it inclusive in their head,” she advises. “Don’t let others’ expectations keep you out.”

To help build their confidence as leaders, Froese recommends women take leadership courses, get involved in organizations like Toast Masters or take positions on boards.

Since most women must take on the majority of childcare and housework duties, finding time to be a full contributor to the farm can be a challenge, says Froese. Consider hiring out some of the domestic work, she recommends. Your input on the farm may prove many times more valuable than what you might pay for such help.

Yes, pregnancy and maternity leaves can be an issue on the farm, but having your own business can also create opportunities for balancing work and family, suggests Rhonda Driediger, owner of Driediger Farms, a 160-acre fruit farm in Langley, B.C. “You may be able to have more control of your hours,” Driediger says.

In addition to growing her own raspberries and blueberries, Driediger also buys from other local growers for her instant-freeze processing plant. Farmers from some cultural backgrounds don’t want to deal with her because she is a woman, but that doesn’t bother Driediger, who says she picks who she buys from and looks for reputable farmers so she can build long-term relationships.

Driediger spent several years in project management with an engineering firm before returning to the family farm and eventually taking it over completely. She sits on several boards including the Raspberry Council and she is chair of the B.C. Ag Council. She highly recommends women get involved in industry boards.

“Industry involvement is key to being a good manager,” Driediger says. “You meet colleagues... get a different perspective and get ideas you can use in your own farm business,” she says. “And it helps you learn to speak up and get your point across.”

One way to shorten the learning curve to success is to find a mentor, adds Simi Valley, California life coach, author and motivational speaker, Mary Morrissey. Morrissey will be speaking at the Advancing Women in Agriculture conference in Calgary in late April.

Mentors are those who are a few steps up the ladder, but who reach down to help you, Morrissey says. “You still have to take the steps but they understand what you need to do.”

To find a good mentor, Morrissey says you need to figure out what area of your life you really want to bring change to. “Then look for people in your industry who have achieved in that area in a practical, measurable way. Be really specific about the result you want,” she advises.

We all benefit when everyone is able to work to their full potential, using all of their skills and strengths, these women say. By developing their leadership skills, women can ensure their voices are heard. **CG**

Advancing Women in Agriculture conference

Looking to develop leadership skills? The Advancing Women in Agriculture conference is scheduled for Calgary, Alta. on April 28 and 29, 2014.

The program features sessions on leadership, communication, money management, networking, work-life balance and mentoring.

For more information, check out the conference website at www.advancingwomenconference.ca.