



BUILD WHAT LASTS
AgStrat Strategic Solutions

When "Family First" Costs Too Much

5 questions for recognizing when loyalty to the farm and family makes it difficult to know what you actually think, feel, and need

Family farms are different from most businesses. Your business partner may also be your father. Your employee may be your daughter. Your landlord may be your grandmother. The person making decisions about your compensation may also be sitting across from you at Thanksgiving.

That closeness can create tremendous strength. Families sacrifice for each other, work through hard years, and think in generations. But there can also be a cost when **"what is best for the family" becomes so important that individuals stop recognizing what they themselves believe, feel, want, or need.** Sometimes the first step is not changing anything. It is simply becoming able to see it.

1 Ask whether "we" has replaced "I"

Farm families naturally talk in terms of **we**: We do not sell ground. We take care of our own. We work until the job is done. We are not the kind of people who complain. Some of those beliefs may be deeply valuable. But when you have lived and worked around the same people for decades, family beliefs can become so familiar that they feel like facts. Healthy family connection does not require everyone to think alike. Adults can honor and remain committed to their families while still developing beliefs and preferences of their own.

ASK YOURSELF: Which of my strongest beliefs about work, money, family, and the farm have I personally chosen - and which have I simply inherited?

2 Notice what happens when you want something different

Imagine wanting to sell some land, work fewer hours, start your own enterprise, farm differently than Dad, take a job somewhere else, pay yourself more, or simply say that you disagree. What happens inside you? Perhaps you immediately feel guilt, anxiety, fear of disappointing someone, or a need to justify yourself. That reaction is worth noticing. **Guilt does not automatically mean you are doing something wrong.** Sometimes it means you are doing something different from what your family expects.

ASK YOURSELF: What would I choose differently if I knew my family would still love and respect me afterward?

3 Learn to recognize your emotions instead of immediately solving them

Farm culture rewards action: something breaks, fix it; weather is coming, get moving; an animal is sick, deal with it. That practical mindset is valuable, but not every family problem can be repaired like equipment. Anger, disappointment, resentment, fear, exhaustion, sadness, and conflict all carry information. Resentment may point toward something that feels unfair. Anxiety may signal uncertainty. Sadness may reveal something valuable that is changing or being lost. **The goal is not to let feelings run the farm. It is to stop pretending they are not part of the people who do.**

ASK YOURSELF: When I experience an uncomfortable emotion around my family or the farm, do I understand what it may be telling me - or immediately push it aside and keep working?



BUILD WHAT LASTS
AgStrat Strategic Solutions

4 Recognize when family loyalty has become enmeshment

There is a psychological term that can be useful here: **enmeshment**. It describes relationships where boundaries become so blurred that individual independence, needs, emotions, or identities are difficult to separate from the family. It can feel like, **"If Dad is disappointed in my decision, I must have made the wrong decision,"** or that saying no is a betrayal. In some families, these patterns grew during genuinely hard periods. Ways of surviving together can become family rules long after the original crisis has passed.

ASK YOURSELF: Can I disappoint someone I love without believing that I have betrayed them?

5 Learn the difference between stewardship and self-erasure

Farm families understand sacrifice. Some sacrifice is part of building anything worthwhile. But stewardship is not the same as disappearing inside what you are stewarding. You can care deeply about the farm without making it your entire identity. You can honor your parents without allowing them to make every adult decision for you. You can love your children without organizing the business around preventing their disappointment. **Healthy families make room for both "us" and "me."** The goal is not independence from everyone; it is becoming secure enough as an individual to choose healthy interdependence with others.

ASK YOURSELF: Where have I confused loving my family with ignoring something important about myself?

Some Family Rules Were Never Actually Spoken

Every family develops rules. Some are explicit. Most are not: **Don't question Dad. Don't talk about money. Don't let outsiders know our problems. Don't complain. Don't sell land. Don't make Mom worry. Don't leave when everyone else stayed. Don't need too much.**

Nobody may remember deciding these things, but everyone may know what happens when somebody violates them. That is what makes invisible family rules powerful. **You cannot examine a rule you do not realize exists.**

"What do we want to carry forward - and what are we finally allowed to put down?"

This is not about blaming your parents. They inherited family rules too, and their parents probably did before them. The useful question is whether each rule, expectation, fear, or role still deserves to be carried into another generation.

START WITH CURIOSITY, NOT CONFRONTATION

WHAT DO I BELIEVE? If nobody in my family had an opinion, what would I actually think about this?

WHAT DO I FEEL? Before explaining or fixing it, can I identify what I am experiencing?

WHAT DO I NEED? Is there something legitimate I repeatedly dismiss because someone else's needs always seem more important?

WHAT AM I AFRAID WILL HAPPEN? If I disagree, say no, change direction, or ask for something different, what am I afraid it will cost me relationally?

WHAT DO I WANT TO CARRY FORWARD? Which parts of my family's culture, sacrifice, work ethic, faith, values, and traditions do I genuinely want to preserve?

WHAT CAN I PUT DOWN? Which fears, expectations, roles, resentments, or unwritten rules do not need to be passed to another generation?

BUILD WHAT LASTS

AgStrat helps farm and family-business owners work through the leadership, relational, organizational, and economic realities that shape what gets passed from one generation to the next.

Sometimes building what lasts requires deciding not only what you want to pass on - but what you do not.

To begin a confidential conversation about your family, farm, leadership, or transition, contact AgStrat at virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Leadership | Culture | Stewardship | Succession | Legacy