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Families under pressure must keep communication channels open

BROOKINGS, S.D. – The pressure on rural families facing delays in their row crops harvest can add stress and cause misunderstandings.

That's according to South Dakota Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Educator Nancy Pauly, who reminds farm families of the importance of considering how we talk and listen during times of stress.

"It is easy to experience misunderstandings during stressful times, which can add more stress or pressure," Pauly said. "Whether we are communicating with lenders, creditors, insurance staff, or family members, the three principles for effective communication are speaking carefully, listening effectively, and responding accurately."

To reduce miscommunication, Pauly said it's important to speak carefully and be specific. "Listeners are not mind readers, so define the problem or name the feeling," Pauly said. "It is unlikely that others will know what we want or how we feel if we leave them guessing."

Pauly said farm family members should stay focused and discuss only the issue at hand.

"Getting off track and bringing up old issues is confusing and irritating, so don't say things you do not mean and threaten things you will not carry out," said Pauly. "Say less, as silence is helpful when emotions are strong, or when we feel stressed or tired. We often say things we do not mean in those times, or we exaggerate or escalate the situation to magnitudes that are not real."

It's also crucial to use tact, Pauly said.

"Keep comments descriptive rather than critical, blaming or all knowing, and if people can avoid criticism and sarcasm, it will help," said Pauly. "Try using more 'I' statements because they are less threatening to the listener."

When listening, do so attentively and with empathy by trying to put yourself in the shoes of the person speaking.

“Try hard to understand their perspective, because it is not necessary to agree with the other point of view in order to understand or empathize with it,” Pauly said. “Make yourself listen without interrupting, because it is sometimes necessary to stop talking to hear all of the words. Concentrate on the words, pay careful attention to the nonverbal gestures, and eliminate mental and physical distractions.”

To receive criticism successfully, it helps to think of a metaphor, Pauly said. “We might suggest the idea of listening like a coffee filter, where you strain the emotional grounds, like fear or anger, from the facts,” said Pauly. “Then we try to accept what is said without giving advice.”

Naturally, there are times when we believe the speaker is wrong and we want to tell them, but Pauly said that, again, tact and patience are good strategies.

“We know how good it would feel to tell them what to do, but even when the advice is eventually followed, the timing of giving advice is important,” she said. “It is best to listen, to support, and to let the feelings be heard before offering any advice.”

Listen carefully until the facts are gathered and you understand what is being said. Ask the speaker to clarify anything that you do not understand, but avoid asking too many questions, as that can be distracting.

“Check your interpretations because the goal of communication is to understand, and listeners interpret what is being said,” Pauly said. “But check with the person you’re talking to, to make sure you are on the same page. Ask them if you are not sure, and be honest.”

Acknowledging and accepting the speaker’s feelings does not mean that you agree with them. Instead, Pauly suggests that pressured family members do a bit of introspection as they fine-tune their conversations.

“Listen to yourself and make a conscious effort to hear how you speak, and listen for attitude in your words,” Pauly said. “We all have the ability to inject either positive or negative attitudes in our words, or to inject a tone of voice that can calm someone or make them angry.”

As an example, Pauly said that steady streams of snappy responses often put others on the defensive.

“We may not always get what we want, but it is important to clearly make our wishes known so we do not build up resentment with our families, our business partners, and our friends,” she said. “Listening to understand the needs and wants of others with sensitivity demonstrates how much we care. When everyone involved in the communication process speaks and listens carefully, it is easier to share perceptions and feelings while moving toward understanding one another.”

