

# Feature Story



## Puzzle pieces: the art of succession planning

Second generation. Third generation. Fourth. Fifth. Many farms today have quite the legacy, and growing these legacies through the years took dedication and passion. Now, to continue their growth, farm leaders must review the road ahead and plan for future generations.

That may be easier said than done. Succession planning can be a complicated process. Naturally, it spans generations, involving multiple perspectives, different experiences and countless moving parts.

“Succession planning can be a significant logistical undertaking with many boxes to check,” said Rodney Phelps, Innovation Specialist, BASF. Phelps has worked with many growers in his home state of Illinois and knows how much effort goes into planning for a farm’s future.

“There are many questions needing answers,” said Phelps. “What is the timeline?’ ‘What is the estate plan?’ ‘Should our business structure change?’ Heads need to come together to figure these out.”

Phelps explained that each operation is different and will have their own unique approach to building their plans. He’s seen some farms put pen to paper and draft a written succession plan, while others opt for verbal discussion. No matter the forum, communication and collaboration are key.

“So much of farming is teamwork. Succession planning is no exception,” said Phelps. “The more people that can get on board, the more successful a transition can be.”

Before his tenure at BASF, Phelps helped manage an operation going on its fifth generation and saw firsthand a succession plan at work. The family had determined that after great-grandpa retired, grandpa would lead; after that, dad would take the reins, and so on. The agreed-upon cascade of leadership helped ensure business ran smoothly.

“This approach worked so well in this situation because, even as roles were outlined, collaboration was common — and encouraged — across all generations,” said Phelps.

Shane Ryan knows the importance of such teamwork well. Ryan farms corn, soybeans, alfalfa and cereal rye on his northwestern Illinois family farm along with his father, uncle and grandfather.

“We manage our operation together and share an outward enthusiasm for farming,” said Ryan. “I, and my dad and uncle before me, joined the operation at a young age and have worked together ever since.”

Ryan said their succession plan has been in place for years, emphasizing a gradual evolution of leadership. He believes that for healthy growth on their farm, a long-term approach will be most beneficial.

“When someone is ready to retire, it will be no different than when they came on,” said Ryan. “It’s not a date or age written in stone, rather it’s determined by individual wishes and enthusiasm.”

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Ryan's own love for farming began in childhood. His elders first tasked him with steering the hay baler while square baling, which stemmed into driving the feed wagon to eventually running the corn planter. He jokingly remembers at age 10 wanting to be in the corn fields more than the baseball field.

"Farming has always been a passion, and having opportunities to participate early on taught me much of the skillset I've needed to help run the operation now."

When thinking of the future of his farm, Ryan knows his aspirations. In order to get there, the formal tasks of succession planning need to be executed. But Ryan says fostering a love for agriculture in future generations needs to happen, too.

"For me, creating that feeling and bond for my son and future grandkids is just as essential as anything," said Ryan. "It's great to run a tight ship and a cutting-edge business, but nothing feels better than being able to say we run a three-generation farm."