

THE PROBLEM: How can a new idea be presented to partners so they're more likely to listen than to criticize?

Problem Submitted By J.P., Wisconsin

When I walked out of my family meeting last week, I seriously considered never going back. I've calmed down since, but I'm still asking myself if it's worth all the pain of trying.

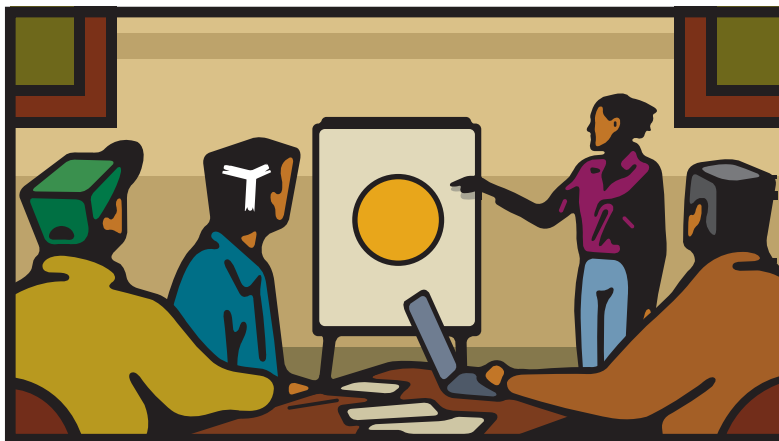
Our business meetings are always painful, but now we're attacking each other personally.

I've been pushing for a new farm office for at least a year. And two months ago, Dad told me to put together some alternatives to discuss at last Friday's meeting.

I looked at everything from remodeling to temporary facilities to building something totally new. A local builder even drew up some preliminary designs for a project we could ease into over a few years. It was exciting stuff, from my point of view, and I was looking forward to presenting and discussing what we needed to do.

How foolish I was. When we got around to my part of the agenda, I outlined our three options: status quo (which I pointed out was unacceptable), a temporary solution (basically a waste of money), and the expandable new building (my recommendation).

Almost immediately, Dad made a joke about going to two shifts in the office ("hot-desking it," he called it). My older brother accused me of always wanting to throw away money on projects that don't make money. My sister complained that she didn't remember asking me to do any study about a new office, which we didn't



need anyway.

Ten minutes into my presentation, and I was shut down before I could even explain what I was recommending. That's when I threw the drawings across the room and left.

How can we ever make decisions when people refuse to listen?

Dr. Jonovic's Solution

Family farm meetings are usually begun reluctantly when "the kids" start taking on real responsibility in the operation. Before that, a few grunts over breakfast are enough to plan the day.

Trouble starts almost immediately. Early meetings are undisciplined – little more than breakfast conversations with more people. That's bad enough, but add family history, parental authority, and sibling rivalries to the lack of meeting structure or procedures, and you wind up with people storming out of rooms and fraying partnerships.

J.P.'s disaster is a good example of the many things that can go wrong.

1. There was no agreement that it was J.P.'s project in the first place. (Dad gave it to her offhandedly, probably out

of frustration.) Instead of listening, everyone wondered why she was talking at all.

2. Alternatives weren't predefined. Worse, J.P. came with her own bias: a new building was the only option. If others had ideas, they obviously hadn't had time to

study the problem.

3. Information wasn't distributed before the meeting. In essence, everyone except Dad was completely blindsided – not the best road to receptivity and open minds.

4. There was no meeting protocol. Most likely there wasn't even a chairperson to enforce protocol if it existed. It's hard to state your case when you can't even hold the floor.

Having meetings is a start, but without rules and procedures, you've only gone from random noncommunication to scheduled misunderstanding.

How do your meetings stand up? □

Donald J. Jonovic

Dr. Donald J. Jonovic's farm planning tool, "Ag-Planner/IV" (\$68.45), a two-DVD set on farm management and succession (\$48.45), and other books are available at Family Business Management Services. Write to Box 201400, Cleveland, OH 44120 or e-mail djonovic@entre-ag.com. Web: www.familybusinessmgt.com



Illustration: Neal Aspinall