

The Dispatch

Family Business Insight for your Agriculture Company

March 2024: **The Joys and Challenges of Transition and Memory**

Even as Spring once again breaks forth with its fullness and fragrance, we are reminded that this freshness means that we are a year older and face familiar as well as new challenges. This month's Dispatch tries to explore some of these challenges, under the heads of "Transition" and "Memory." Lance first explores the notion of transition and the challenges that transition brings. One of those challenges is to our individual and collective memory. We talk about memory because it is key to our identity, but it also fades and gets lost in the flow of time. Davon explores the ambiguity of memory's gift and challenge in her essay. And Bill concludes with his recent experience of leading a seminar for seniors on the joys and challenges of memory. We wish you smooth transitions and good memories! Let us know your thoughts about these two most vital issues. – [Bill](#)

The Ambiguous End of a Transition

[Lance Woodbury](#)

We usually think of most transitions in life as having clear beginnings and endings. We stop being single and start being married. We live in one house until we move to another. We end one job and begin a new one. Our kids live with us and then they move out – until, of course, they move back in!

But in family businesses, the end of a transition often isn't so clear-cut. Retirement is not as much of a hard stop if Mom and Dad still live on the farmstead or ranch, if they still own assets used by younger generations, or if they still maintain an identity ("farmer," for example) that is based on a daily activity or task. Family members' roles in the business don't end as much as morph into wearing multiple hats. Even if a family member wants to leave the business, the assets, equity, and relationships are often so interwoven that the process of ending can take years. "The end" fades in and out of our view like a desert mirage, and with it comes a rollercoaster of emotions.

This ambiguity in family business transitions relating to ownership, management roles, or identities can create confusion and anxiety. The transition can be hard on everyone, from those stepping up to those stepping away, like an awkward dance where everyone is trying to avoid stepping on each other's toes.

Perhaps the first step in dealing with this "[messy middle,](#)" which in fact may be part of a "long goodbye," is to embrace the idea that something new is around the corner. You may not be clear on what that next chapter holds or may offer, but knowing that there is indeed a next phase or a next act may help you embrace the idea that every ending is, in fact, a new beginning.

Memories Celebrated

[Davon Cook](#)

As loved ones age, we become suddenly aware of fading memories and what stories and knowledge will be lost with them. I find myself having two contrary reactions. I'm frantically trying to document, store, or commit to remember it all myself. Or I'm feeling guilty that I'm not doing enough of all of those! That quickly becomes a no-win game.

I'm trying to focus less on what's lost or gained and more on *celebrating* a few that are precious. Admit that some memories, stories, and knowledge *will* pass by. My children are never going to care as much about stories of my

grandparents as I do. Heck, they're not going to care about all of *my* stories! I'm never going to be able to remember all the history my parents have told me. That's ok. Future descendants will make their own new memories and history. And that is something in itself to celebrate—the lives before us that have enabled future generations to thrive.

If you are desiring to capture fleeting stories, consider a few methods that beautifully honor family and business legacies. Video interviews allow you to capture the presence of an individual, whether it's smartphone DIY or using a professional service. With the democracy of publishing these days, you can find a professional to create written interviews or a book. And you can ask individuals to write their own legacy letter to distill their own favorite stories and messages. Now may be the time! I've heard heartfelt regrets of 'we never got it done'.

In the meantime, stop and celebrate with your loved ones the precious stories that make your top list. Savor the time reminiscing and the laughs, even when you've heard it umpteen times! That process, in and of itself, is a memory worth creating!

Keeping Your Words Together—A Memory Seminar

[Bill Long](#)

Every year the Senior Center in my community hosts an all-day welcome event for those crossing the threshold into "senior status," in this case defined as age 65. Most of the seminars at the event cover predictable areas: applying for Medicare, getting your Advanced Directive in order, getting a fitness plan in place. This year, however, I suggested and they accepted my idea: a seminar on how to maintain, cultivate and even improve one's memory as one ages.

The room was overflowing. It seemed as if everyone had either a story of things they forgot or would like to remember better. Even before I could get started on my presentation, someone blurted out, "Well, how do I remember names?" We all had a good laugh, and I actually shared a four-point strategy addressing that issue.

But the focus of our time was on what I observe often among "us" seniors (I now belong in that category): the task of searching for the right words when speaking to others and often coming up either empty or somewhat embarrassed. Sometimes the right words are people from our past (what WAS that actor's name?), but usually it has to do with expressing rather straightforward thoughts. Everyone was all ears, so to speak, as I explained my theory of what I called "word clusters." No time to lay it out fully here, but suffice it to say that it includes having about four words available in mind for every idea one wants to describe. If there is interest in learning more about my strategy, [email me](#)!