



FAMILY

Making Decisions and Coping Well with Drought

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by R.J. Fetsch¹

Quick Facts...

There are at least three ways families can make decisions in their family meetings—autocratically, democratically, and by consensus.

Reaching consensus is useful with major family decisions. However, it may be too time consuming to use with smaller decisions where an autocratic or democratic decision-making strategy can suffice.

When one person has all the power in decision-making others may feel discounted or disenfranchised.

Intergenerational families that use a consensus decision-making strategy show improved family functioning, family satisfaction, self-esteem, and family coping levels.

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Drought, like other natural disasters, costs individuals and families an incredible amount of worry, concern, stress, and money. Some farm and ranch families have to make agonizing decisions about selling prized cattle that three or four generations of their families worked hard to develop because they do not have the resources to feed them anymore. Economic costs of a drought include loss in tax dollars and increased food costs.

Making Sound Decisions

A recent sociological study was conducted from 1995 to 1997 where 103 adults on 56 farms were interviewed in two Australian states.² Because Australia has the lowest rainfall of any continent, drought is a significant public issue.³ Only 11 percent of Australia has rainfall levels suited to agriculture.⁴ Coloradoans can learn a great deal from the Australian experience.

Rural Australia still has a patriarchal system of land tenure⁵ that is similar to much of Colorado. Researchers found that couples who shared the stresses and hardships of drought through mutual decision-making strengthened and supported their partnership and reduced their overwhelming personal response to the disaster.⁶

Researchers also found that the roles of many women changed in response to the increasing loss of farm/ranch productivity. It helped couples when family members and external support agencies (e.g., counseling) recognized and supported these role changes. Some women producers found a source of strength in their gardens—a place of water, serenity, and greenness—and in their faith and spirituality. In 21 interviews, the majority of the women did not perceive themselves as the dominant decision-maker of major property decisions during drought.⁷ None of the women reported either making the decision alone or taking a lead in the decision. Three even said they were not involved in the decision-making process at all. Eighteen women reported they were partly involved in the decision-making. Three of the men reported making decisions alone; and nine reported taking the lead in decision-making. None of the men reported not being involved in any stage of the decision-making process. The more the women were involved in mutual decision-making, the stronger the partnership and the less overwhelming couples found the drought to be.

Decision-making Styles

There are at least three ways families can make decisions in their family meetings⁸—autocratically, democratically, and by consensus.

Some individual and family decisions are best made *autocratically*. (For example, a grandfather who has always made the decisions about when to buy and sell bulls, cows, and calves.) If an autocratic decision-making style works

In a family of 10 adults, where there is an autocratic decision maker, there is the potential for up to nine family members to be unhappy with the decision. Later if the decision appears to have been a bad one, there can be as many as nine “saboteurs.” Later one to nine family members can bring it up in devious ways that they did not agree with the autocratic decision maker’s decision. This can lead to serious family conflict and discord.

In a democratic decision-making family of 10 there is the potential for one to four adult family members who are unhappy with the decision to be “saboteurs” later if the decision appears to have been a bad one.

well with no particular problems or resentments from other major stakeholders in the family, then that’s okay. However, sometimes in an intergenerational family business, as the second generation reaches adulthood, they want to become more involved in the decision-making process. Learning valuable decision-making skills when family members are young eventually pays off for the older generation too. The older generation can feel confident that their younger family member’s decisions are sound so when they decide to transfer labor, management, and land to the next generation, the family operation will continue successfully. However, it is risky to wait too long with bringing the next generation into the decision-making process because younger family members may choose other occupations including off-farm employment. If you indefinitely avoid training the next generation to make good decisions, you can cause high stress and strain levels and assure the death of the family farm or ranch business.

Oftentimes an autocratic decision-making style works, but sometimes it does not. Family members in farming, ranching, and other businesses where family members work, live, and play side-by-side sometimes experience serious stress, anger, or depression. When one person has all the power in decision-making others may feel discounted or disenfranchised because their beliefs and values are not considered.

Some family decisions are best made **democratically** where majority rules. Some families hold periodic meetings for a variety of reasons—to celebrate birthdays and holidays or make small and large decisions. When these families make a decision, because they have a shared ownership, they use a democratic decision-making strategy. For example, let’s say a family has 10 major adult stakeholders—grandma and grandpa, dad and mom, three sons and daughters and their spouses. As this family decides whether or not to sell the herd of 1,000 because they do not have enough feed, the 10 family members use a democratic decision-making process and a problem-solving strategy.

What is a problem-solving strategy? A problem-solving strategy is when a family identifies and writes down the specific problem. (For example, “We don’t have enough feed, and it is not cost-effective to buy enough hay and feed for our herd of 1,000.”) The family asks each family member, “What do each of us really need or want related to this specific problem?” They brainstorm and write down possible solutions from all the family members without evaluating them at this point. (For example, “Sell the entire herd. Sell part of the herd. Ship them to greener pastures and later ship them back home.”) Eventually they have no more ideas to write down. Then the family evaluates the positive and negative aspects of each brainstormed solution to the problem. Eventually they identify the best solution(s),⁹ (For example, “We will sell all but the best 33 mother cows and 78 heifers in order to maintain the core bloodlines, because we can afford to feed, water, and keep that many.”) Then they put their best solution to a vote where the majority rules. If six or more vote “Yes,” then the decision is made democratically.

Often a democratic family decision-making style works, especially when the viewpoints, values, and beliefs of all major adult stakeholders are listened to, understood, and included. But sometimes in farm, ranch, and other family businesses when family members work, live, and play side-by-side day after day, some family members who were in the minority, who voted against the decision, get their feelings hurt, get angry, get quiet, or pull out from the operation either by clamming up or by physically leaving it altogether.

Therefore families might consider using a **consensus** decision-making strategy. Intergenerational ranch families that use a consensus decision-making strategy show improved family functioning, family satisfaction, self-esteem, family coping levels and reduced family strains, stress, and depression.¹⁰

Consensus is the process of communicating, problem solving, and negotiating major issues until no family member has any major objections to the decision. All the major stakeholders agree that they will live with the decision and not sabotage it.

Deciding by consensus means talking, listening, and problem solving in regular family meetings long enough until everyone agrees to live with the decision. The family meeting leader might say, “I want to check whether we have reached consensus. Does anyone have any major objections to selling our 640-acre north farm? Will all of us agree to live with the decision and not sabotage it?” Reaching consensus is useful with major family decisions that affect all major stakeholders. However, it may be too time consuming to use with small decisions where an autocratic or democratic decision making strategy will often suffice.

Ways to Cope with Drought

- Make wise management decisions by choosing the best way to decide—autocratically, democratically, or by consensus.
- Draw strength from places of peace—a garden, your faith, spirituality.
- Express affection to your spouse. Remember that your partner can be your best ally. Make your relationship a positive strength that you can count on. The two of you plus your kids can all work together to solve your problem responses to the drought¹¹—it’s not just dad’s or mom’s problem.
- Plan family fun times each week.
- Remember to spend weekly one-on-one time with each family member. Show them that they can count on you and your strength and resilience.
- Involve all major stakeholders in the decision-making process to reduce stress and strain and ease the burden of responsibility.
- Talk about, acknowledge, and support changing roles for women and men in maintaining your properties. Husbands, notice the vital role your wife is playing and tell her how much you appreciate what she is doing in ways that she will hear you.
- Practice effective communication by listening to what others say and how they feel and by summarizing both to the speaker’s satisfaction. “It sounds like you’re worried that this drought may lead us to have to cancel your 4-H Club trip to Washington because of lack of money—did I hear you correctly?”
- Listen well to everyone’s ideas about how to cope well with the problems associated with the drought—even the children.
- Use your family meetings to reach a shared family vision for what all of you want for the farm/ranch family business in three to five years. Write it in one sentence so it is easy to remember every day. One Colorado ranch family’s shared vision was: “We want our family ranching to be harmonious, consensual, enjoyable, and profitable.”¹²
- Doing the same thing and expecting different results is unrealistic.
- Hold regular family meetings to recognize achievements and accomplishments, solve problems, create a shared family vision, and make wise decisions.
- Reach out to family, friends, and the community to seek the support you need.
- Ask for what you want from the people who are likely to give it—you just might get it!
- Empathize with others and offer emotional support. Listen well and show that you care. Let them know it is okay to feel what they are

feeling—it's what we do with that anger, depression, etc. that can harm us or others.

- Strive to understand different viewpoints. Imagine walking in their shoes.
- Be hopeful. All of us have experienced crises and survived. Families are resilient. They are survivors who may need to be reminded of their strengths. Even with significant losses, people still have families and friends who can make a difference.

References

²Stehlik, D., Gray, I., & Lawrence, G. (2000, March). Gender and drought: Experiences of Australian women in the drought of the 1990s. *Disasters*, 24(1), pp. 38-53. Retrieved February 28, 2003 from [http://bll.epnet.com/...](http://bll.epnet.com/)

³Gray, I., Stehlik, D., Lawrence, G., & Bulis, H. (1998). Community, communion, and drought in rural Australia. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 29(1), 23-37.

⁴Lester, I. (1994). *Australia's food and nutrition*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

⁵See Poiner, G. (1990). *The good old rule: Gender and other power relationships in a rural community*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

⁶Stehlik, Gray, & Lawrence, 2000.

⁷Stehlik, Gray, & Lawrence, 2000.

⁸For a 10-step, research-based fact sheet on how families can host effective family meetings, ask your local county agent for, or download from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/PUBS/CONSUMER/10249.html> a copy of *Manage Anger Through Family Meetings* (F.S. no. 10.249).

⁹For more problem-solving and conflict management steps, ask your local county agent for, or download from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/PUBS/CONSUMER/10238.html> a copy of *Dealing with Couples' Anger* (F.S. no. 10.238).

¹⁰Fetsch, R. J., & Zimmerman, T. S. (1999). Marriage and family consultation with ranch and farm families: An empirical family case study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25, 485-501. Zimmerman, T. S., & Fetsch, R. J. (1994). Family ranching and farming: A consensus management model to improve family functioning and decrease work stress. *Family Relations*, 43, 125-131.

¹¹For a copy of 24 steps that couples can use to strengthen their relationships, ask your local county agent for, or download from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/PUBS/CONSUMER/10238.html> a copy of *Dealing with Couples' Anger* (F.S. no. 10.238).

¹²Fetsch & Zimmerman, 1999, p. 489.

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¹Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies state specialist and professor, human development and family studies.

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