

**FARM MANAGEMENT ADVISOR: REST THYSELF!!  
THE NEED FOR A WORKING VACATION**

*Guido van der Hoeven  
Extension Specialist/Lecturer  
North Carolina State University  
Email: guido\_vdh@ncsu.edu*

*Emily E. van der Hoeven, B.S.N., R.N  
Email: emily\_vdh@yahoo.com*

**Abstract**

*Too often farm advisors, either in the private or public sectors, follow the adage: “Do as I say, not, as I do”. Farm advisors frequently become “members” of a client’s family, and in doing so, may jeopardize what is near and dear, their own family. As with the cobbler, whose children having no shoes to wear, the farm advisor needs to focus on management issues of the home economy. For successful farm advisors, time is a precious commodity indeed; a working vacation with a spouse/partner can be a solution to accomplish buy-in for new business ideas and continued success in established enterprises. This paper discusses a frame work for a working holiday centred on a questionnaire to which they respond to one another either in oral or written means. The end product of such a working holiday is that spouses/partners have re-established mutual goals and reasons for pressing on.*

*Key Words: vacation, communication, analysis*

**Introduction**

Time to regenerate is needed by all professionals. The recharging of personal batteries is necessary to keep professional focus and commitment to the farm advisory task or any professional undertaking. Jeremy Rifkin in his recent book, *The European Dream*, comments that cultures vary in their respective approaches to vacations and importantly in life perspectives. He states that the Europeans work to live, while those in the United States live to work. Successful farm advisors must balance the many and varied demands on their time, sometimes living to work from one crisis to the next with the potential to neglect what may be of most value, their families and themselves. Maria Shriver, presently first lady of California and author, captures the struggle for work-family balance, “*When we were spending time with our families we felt guilty for not going to work. When we got all caught up in our work we felt guilt about our kids. We found out super heroes had no peace of mind what so ever*”.

The discussion that follows encourages farm advisors in the private and the public sectors to pause a moment and consider the undertaking of a “working vacation”. During this vacation farm advisors practice upon themselves, spouses and partners what they preach to clientele. Breaking with the habit of “doing as I say, not as I do” is the focus of this exercise. The authors suggest the use of a series of questions and written exercises that enhance communication between spouses or partners.

### **Purpose and Preparation**

The purpose of getting away from the normal routine of daily life is simply to disconnect from those routines. Thus, the idea of a working vacation almost sounds, by definition, like an oxymoron. However, the authors contend that farm advisors need to apply their skill set in an intentional manner for the purpose of reviewing their family economy in the context of utilizing a professional eye for the examination. Farm advisors work hard for their clients, however, an intentional critical eye to the “home front” is stepping away from the analogy of the cobbler whose children run about town without any shoes. Purposeful analysis of the home economy can provide useful information that may plug a hole in the dike thereby preventing a flood downstream. The analysis of the home economy entails looking at many aspects of home and family dynamics. A platform from which to work is often the missing key to open insights, potentially overlooked by very busy people. The authors have developed a set of questions from which to begin during this time away, in a neutral and relaxing location, where this analysis is undertaken. Because of increasing pressures within farm consultancy, consultants are looking for tools to work sharper not just harder or longer but more focused and balanced, for clients and self alike.

Maria Shriver continues, “...*the brass ring is balance, weighing and measuring your priorities to put together a life that fulfills you on your terms. Balance also means recalibrating your priorities when you need or want to*”. Attaining balance is easier said than done, hence, this encouragement for a working vacation.

As suggested above, spouses or partners (can be business partners) need to have opportunities to get away to restful environments. These environments are as varied and unique as are the individuals themselves. The point is to get away, from the everyday, to focus on this important task. Further, do so without children or dependants, if they are at home, allowing for focused and dedicated time to interact in the analysis process without distraction.

Whether it is planting or harvest time, working to half past dark generally rules agriculture and those who service it. In agriculture where timing decisions have such consequence, advisors are often pushing the limits of their own physical and psychological abilities in order to gain a little more daylight or opportunity for a client. Fatigue is the result or risk of repetitive action. As with a tractor, a fax machine

or a partner the use and misuse, without periodic maintenance and thorough examination (for the cause not the symptom), can transition through normal wear and tear to fatigue into failure. The business practice of a working vacation is used to define goals, refresh relationships, promote communication and in the long run restore productivity.

Like farming, many consultancies are built on the backs of families which must bear the strain of their advisor's apparent unending flexibility in responding to the demands of client farms. The consultant can face more quick turns in a day than the average rugby player in a match. Likewise the partners and families must do "the dance" to keep in step. Outcomes usually can be described as "Leftovers Again". The obvious picture drawn, therefore, is of a consultant arriving to a darkened sleeping house for the third night running. The light of the microwave outlines the tented plate from supper. If the advisor is lucky a note of instruction, from the partner, on reheating is included (for the food not the relationship!). But leftovers are also an apt description of what the partner and family receive when most available resources are drained emotionally and physically without time apart for recharge. The client may receive the first consideration of time and energy from the advisor while the partner must manage the home front, snatching a bit of time together on the weekends from the leftovers.

Stacy Colino cites a recently published study in which researchers at the University of Texas at Austin gave one partner from 86 dating couples a 3 day writing assignment. Each day, half of the subject group wrote down information of everyday life. The other half committed their deeper thoughts and feelings about their relationships to paper. Not all observations were positives. Three months after journaling 77 percent who wrote about their relationship were still going strong while only 52 percent of the everyday journalers were together. There is a common belief that conflict is destructive and to be avoided which tends toward suppressing anger and negative feelings instead of resolving anything. Walls are built. Colino further quotes study co-author James Pennebaker, PhD, professor and chair of psychology at University of Texas Austin, as saying; *"Standing back and writing about important issues can give you perspective and help focus on the central topics of importance. This process can lead to greater honesty, stability and intimacy in the relationship"*.

## **Methodology**

Often it is said that perception is ninety percent reality. The use of a working vacation with a commitment to discovering new ideas, thoughts and needs between spouses/partners is helpful to long-term relationship success. The structure of a working vacation is basic to a successful outcome. The communication tool used is the writing of letters or essays between spouses/partners; followed by discussion of the writings. The questionnaire tool can be broken down into 3 main focal points. These points are: 1) the couple, spouses/partners; 2) the family; 3) the work/business interests of the couple. This necessitates three distinct and intentional periods of communication to address each point: for

example, three 4-hour time periods over a weekend, or three or more days away from competing agendas to give perspective and refreshment. Relaxing and refreshing activities are used as time space between the “work” of this vacation. These joint relaxing activities provide yet another venue for continuing the discussion of what is being learned about each other.

The activity during these periods is used to accomplish the art of communication. Jointly, but in separate places spouses/partners write and describe for the other responses to questions. These responses can be in the form of a love letter between spouses. If business partners are undertaking this exercise, an essay is a more appropriate format. Either way, the writers are separated physically, if possible, by using different rooms, patios or space. After a given period of time, say, one – two hours, the pair meets and exchanges letters or essays. These exchanged essays or letters are read twice, once for the heart and a second time for the head. Notes or questions for explanation may be made during this reading time. Again, after a time of contemplation regarding what was shared on paper, questions and discussion can follow to expand upon what was learned by the each spouse/partner. Hopefully, illumination is beginning to shine as new facets in the relationship are being revealed. This is ultimately the goal for this working vacation, as well as the formation of a new and constructive habit.

When planning the time for a working vacation a little homework goes a long way. Consider the place you will be. It is important to have privacy away from the paralyzing pressures of daily routine. You will also want to inquire as to the opportunities for fun together. This is not the weekend for hiring a deep sea fishing boat if only one of you likes to fish. However trying something new for both partners will draw them beyond their usual boundaries.

Be creative, Smile and Try to say YES! As a professional farm advisor you do this all the time. It is part of the work of this vacation.

Do not over commit! The purpose of this vacation is to begin a new habit, not to get it done. If you are able to identify areas where new goals are needed; you have been successful too.

A few things to leave home:

1. Cell phones, beepers, fax machines and laptops, and
2. Any client related business, this is your time with the board of directors of a very important company -- Your Family.

A few things to bring along:

1. Paper (lined and colored), pencils or pens, a calendar or agenda,
2. An open inquisitive mind,
3. A sense of humor and fun,
4. A listening heart, and,
5. A good bottle of merlot is a plus too!

A suggested construct of a questionnaire tool is provided. Obviously, questions can be added or deleted as needed or tailored to the circumstances.

## Summary

The lead author, as a farm advisor, is finding, relative to: family business planning, succession, business growth, and general family/business issues, it's the "soft people" side that needs the most attention. Conversations with colleagues, brings general agreement that the finance/production side used to be 90% of our advising focus and 20% people/family/relationships...now it's flipped; we are spending nearly 80% of our time in workshops and conferences addressing people issues, team building, etc. The income and technical issues of operations are important, but often once the "people" needs are met, the remaining questions with responses fall into place.

With a good communicating management team in place, issues of family, finance (business and personal) and production come to a workable solution, not to say it's easy...but a balancing act...one that I've watched professional farm advisors (author included) dance a time or two. The fundamental point is to communicate clearly and effectively in order to accomplish the goals set forth by those to whom it matters most. Use of letter writing, as suggested here, can facilitate that communication.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire tool for use during a working vacation

Okay: Here's the working vacation's TO DO LIST.

#### Couple Focus

1. How are you, as a couple, a marriage team, as partners...a unit of one?
2. What are your unique individual goals?
  - i. Personal
  - ii. Family
  - iii. Business
3. Where are you pulling together...knowingly?...unknowingly?
4. What are some differences?

#### Family Focus

1. Review the status of your family:
2. Where you are as a family unit...the times are changing with young adult children
3. How are the wee ones?
4. Are the children meeting your expectations?
5. Are your expectations reasonable?
6. Are they meeting theirs?
7. What resources are going to be needed to be available to meet the children's needs in the next 5 years, 10 years?
8. Do the older children have any articulated goals...what can you do to encourage...not necessarily provide, to accomplish the goal?
9. Anything on your list.

#### Review of Business Interests or Holdings

1. Review current status of all business interests
  - Consultancy business
  - Farming business, if any
  - Real estate holdings
  - Other businesses

2. 5, 10, and 15 year projections for holdings, expansion of some, liquidation of others...general long-run views
3. Review estate plans of each...do you have plans in place for a "what if"?
4. Succession...if that is in the works...plans are they laid out, at what trigger points do things happen? Are the people and people skills in place for the succession to be a success...the production factors will follow...given "normal" operation constraints: finance, weather, risk, and markets?

This tool focuses on the written word. The authors believe that written communication is more intentional and thereby conveys a fuller message; perhaps intimate is a better word when used by couples. The task is to write letters, spouse/partner to spouse/partner or business partner to business partner to communicate core beliefs on varied topics relating to relationship within the context of family or businesses and the topics of review from the list above.

But first the rules:

- 1) Go to separate rooms or space and write the letter,
- 2) After a time, come back together, exchange the letters and read them, TWICE, once for the heart, and a second time for the head.
- 3) Then spend time discussing what you've learned about each other.

Below are suggested questions for spouses/partners. These letters or essays may include more personalized comments or thoughts related to the review of issues above.

- A) \_\_\_\_\_ attracts me to you, even after \_\_\_\_ years of marriage and motivates me to redouble my efforts to meet your needs.
- B) I envisage that the next 5 years will be \_\_\_\_\_; in 15 years I hope you and I will have enjoyed the success of \_\_\_\_\_.
- C) If there was one thing that I could change about myself, to make me a better husband/wife, business person, friend/confidant, support for you...it would be \_\_\_\_\_.
- D) When I look back at our combined efforts I am most happy about \_\_\_\_\_; therefore, as a springboard, I look forward to \_\_\_\_\_.
- E) Rating our relationship, I rank it between 1 and 5, with 5 being most excellent, and this is why.
- F) One of the most challenging issues I face(d) in our relationship is \_\_\_\_\_, and this is how I deal with it.

G) The celebration or tradition we have in our family I cherish the most is \_\_\_\_\_  
because....

H) Some of your own topics, keep them open ended and short

Some consultancy/work related questions that each might answer in the context of exploring perceptions versus realities.

A) Do I get more personal wellbeing (satisfaction) from my working relationships than I do at home?

If this is true, what can be identified that is more (most) fulfilling?

How can family time(s) become more fulfilling?

B) All of us have 168 hours in the week to accomplish needed tasks, using a scale of 1 to 10, ten being very content with time allocation, rate your allocation of time between work and family. If less content, discuss possible changes to make.

Do you negotiate for more time to pursue or complete activities?

C) What times, specifically, during the week, month or year are most stressful for you?

D) Is each of you aware of the normal stress of the other's job/career?

E) Have you attained your career objectives? If not, how might the spouse/partner help?