

A Different Way to Look at the World

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Last year, I had the opportunity to get involved in a Holistic Management training course offered by the Savory Center out of New Mexico. Some of Allan Savory's ideas are controversial, but I like the basic concepts of his goal-setting and decision-making framework for farm operations.

There are other whole farm planning programs, but this is the only one I've found that focuses not only on economic performance, but also environmental performance and quality of life. Farming is hard work and we often don't find the time to take a longer view of what kind of life we want for ourselves and our children. Think about it: Why do people farm? Of course it's to pay the bills. But if that were the only reason, why not just get a job in town?

There's got to be something that motivates us to farm, that drives us to do what we do. It might be working with animals, making things grow, producing quality products that feed our country; it might just be tradition or it might be the good setting it provides for raising kids. Whatever our reasons, if we don't gain something meaningful out of farming, why bother?

Holistic Management asks: How can we make decisions that reinforce and contribute to what we value most about what we're doing? The HM framework sets out a means of determining what's really important to us and creates a structure that guides us toward our goals.

Thinking Holistically

In our society we tend to compartmentalize things, separating the parts of a farming operation into discrete enterprises. It's easier to deal with the individual pieces: the corn crop, the dairy herd, the off-farm job.

We're good at taking things apart and fixing them, but we don't do as well making them work together. It's this problem-solving approach that often obscures our long-term goals and leads us to make decisions that compromise our values for the sake of short-term fixes.

Holistic Management encourages us to think ecologically. Ecology is the study of relationships among living things and their environment. On a farm, it involves all the physical and biological components of the farm and those who run it. All those individual pieces interact with each other within the 'whole' of the farm. Making a change in one area is going to affect others. Realistically, we cannot really separate them into discrete pieces. We need to keep all of them, and how they interact, in mind as we make decisions.

So, Holistic Management isn't really a revolutionary concept. It's simply a framework which helps us see this big picture more clearly so that we can define our goals and keep ourselves moving toward them.

Creating a goal for your farm.

Traditionally, goals for farming operations tend to be business objectives involving crop yields, milk production targets, income projections. The process of developing a 'Holistic Goal' involves getting beyond the functional level and thinking about what you want to get out of your life in the long term. Here's how to do it:

Gather together everyone who's involved in your operation. Include not only your business partners, but your spouse and kids, siblings, parents, whoever directly influences or is influenced by how the farm is run. These are your decision-makers. Not all of them are directly involved in running the farm, but they're key people if your ultimate purpose is to provide not only financial security, but also a rich and satisfying life for your family. Involving all these people in setting goals can complicate things, but it's critical to its success.

With your decision-makers, develop a list of your physical resources: land, buildings, equipment, animals, the things that make your farm function. Also list all those people who you look to for advice and assistance: your nutritionist, vet, crop consultant; your hired man, your banker, the FSA office, the local ag supplier (even your Extension Agent). This is your resource base. These are all resources that you can call on to help move you toward your goal.

Make a list of financial resources: your savings and checking accounts, stocks, retirement accounts, your projected income, your credit line. Together these three items—decision-makers, resource base, and financial resources—make up the 'whole' that you manage.

Now to the goal. The goal itself also includes three parts: quality of life, forms of production, and future resource base. The quality of life piece is a statement that sums up what's really important to you. It often doesn't have anything to do with the mechanics of running a farm. Rather, it reflects the core values that motivate you.

An example: Profitability is a universal goal. But for what purpose? What do our income goals say about our motivations? Do we want enough money to send the kids to college? To have a comfortable retirement? To take vacations or indulge in hobbies? Do we want to be debt-free? Do we simply want to be financially secure? How much profit do we need and for what purpose? That's what goes into the holistic goal.

And we all have motivations other than financial ones. In addition to economic well-being, most families include other values such as strong relationships with friends and family, intellectual challenges that spur personal growth, and a sense purpose and contribution to the greater good. It's human nature to need and want these things.

Determining what these core values are is not always easy or comfortable, but it's important. For example, most of us don't like to dwell on physical health issues, but we all know that milking cows is hard on knees and backs. If a dairy farmer makes decisions based on year to year financial performance, he might never feel that he can afford a milking parlor. But, if you think about the long-term consequences of not installing one—having to quit milking at a young age, expensive operations, or chronic poor health in old age—that farmer's short-term priorities might be different. If your health is important to the long-term financial success of the operation, then it warrants a statement in your family's holistic goal.

Having your decision-makers come together and agree on a collection of values encourages everyone to work toward a unified purpose. Putting the goals in writing is a major step in changing the way your farm operation makes decisions.

Once you have some statements representing your values and motivations, you develop ‘forms of production’ relating to each of them. If one of your values is staying healthy, one of your forms of production might be investing in farm improvements that can make that more likely. For each value statement in your goal, you need to think of a way to ‘produce’ that outcome.

If one of your goals is to be able to take vacations away from your farm, your forms of production might include organizing your operation so that it can be easily maintained by others, being good friends and neighbors so that you can ask those friends to help when you’re gone, or having enough income to pay for having someone take care of things while you’re gone.

Finally, the goal includes a longer look into the future. What sort of ‘future resource base’ do you need to be there to allow you to continue working toward your goals over the long term? As farmers, the future resource base will, of necessity, include maintaining the productivity of the land.

We also include external things that affect our operation’s success, like the continued presence of a commercial infrastructure to process our products and a community of consumers to buy those products. Why do we include these things that are a whole lot bigger than we are? Because sometimes there are small things we can do to support these broader structures, or sometimes we need to plan for what we’ll do if they’re no longer there. Like create a structure to replace them (for example, an on-farm milk processing plant) or shift into a different enterprise. Either way, it’s important to keep them in mind as we plan for our future.

The holistic goal doesn’t have to be perfect—in fact, it should be looked on as a ‘living document’ that your decision-makers get together and revisit annually or more often as needed. It is the process of discussing and coming to a consensus on these important issues that makes the biggest difference in how we live our lives.

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