

Abstract

from

A thesis submitted to University College Dublin in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Masters in Agricultural Science Extension and Innovation

An assessment of the role of Teagasc Advisors with farm families through Succession and Inheritance planning.

This study assesses the role of Teagasc Advisors in farm family succession and inheritance planning focusing primarily on the soft skill of communication. The topic highlighted the significance of an advisory role and personal ability in supporting courageous conversations. The importance of listening to understand, including all farm family members in conversations requires time and commitment to invest in the succession planning process. The competency and confidence to facilitate communication including addressing underlying concerns while mindful of ongoing non-verbal communication is a skill. These soft skills are mostly acquired by advisors over many years of experience. Soft skills are people skills and essential in facilitating and advising on succession and inheritance planning.

While there is a large volume of research and literature on succession and inheritance in Ireland from the farmers perspective, this is not matched by research on the role of the advisors in addressing such topics. This study focused on Teagasc and the advisors skillset on facilitating succession and inheritance.

Data was sourced from several sources: twelve Teagasc Regional Reviews; participation data from Teagasc Transferring the Family Farm Clinics; and 15 semi-structured interviews with key informants within Teagasc (new advisors, long-serving advisors, regional managers, specialists) and Dr. Tom Kelly Director of Knowledge Transfer.

The reviews from 2015 and 2018 highlighted that Teagasc needs to identify its future role in the area of farm succession and transfer and ensure appropriate delivery models are in place.

Continuous development of Advisors in the 'soft' skills of facilitation and advisory work is a key priority for inclusion in the Continuous Professional Development provision. The participation data from the Transferring the Family Farm Clinics quantified the ongoing client need for succession information and support with more than 7,000 clients attending between 2014-2019. All available regional advisors attended however their specific contribution input were not identifiable with the exception of national specialists.

Findings from the interviews highlighted that advisors do have a role in supporting and planning succession and inheritance conversations with their clients. Their challenges varied from lack of experience to lack of training in soft skills to address emotionally challenging conversations. However, the advisors' own experiences were an innate essential resource.

All advisors were science trained in hard skills with an abundance of ongoing technical knowledge training. In contrast, the identified deficit of 'soft' skills of inter and intrapersonal communication awareness was recognised as an area which requires further development to support advisors. Soft skills, while essential through an intergenerational transition process, were also identified as transferable skills to support advisors with other challenging and courageous client conversations.

This study concludes that while succession and inheritance are essential in the lifetime of every farm family, these conversations come with enormous barriers for many advisors within Teagasc. The findings of this assessment are likely to be of interest and of value to industry and policy makers, the agricultural educational establishment and Teagasc.