

Family and business coming together is powerful when it works and it doesn't. Kate Rivett-Taylor and her brothers who are

Photos by A

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g together can be incredibly
fraught with consequences if
r caught up with two farming
closer than most.

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When Duncan and Angus Brown have a bit of a ding-dong argument, staff know to stay out of the road.

“When we have a barney and we do all the time, we walk away for five minutes. We don’t generally argue about major things, but we have our own way of doing things and don’t appreciate the other commenting on that,” says Duncan.

The Woodville twin brothers have been running a farm together for almost five years and things can get a bit testy when they disagree but it doesn’t last for long. They know each other too well. They have leased two family properties from their parents and an uncle for four years – settling into their own routine about who does what and when and how.

Although twins working together in the same business is a slightly unusual scenario, the circumstances and challenges they face are common throughout the industry.

Families across New Zealand have been working together for decades, not all successfully, whether their business is retail, corporate or rural. And the same message applies to all of them, whether they’re wearing gumboots or business shoes, say two people dealing with working families.

Rural specialist accountant Rick Cranswick used to farm with his brother and is now at Hawke’s Bay firm WHK Coffey Davidson. He says families need someone to give them advice on both sides – it could be the same person, but it has to be someone who knows what they’re doing.

Obviously not everyone is at the same age or stage of life and people forget how important that can be, he says.

When you’re young there’s more propensity to take risks but that tends to dwindle as you get older. Using a bell curve analogy, he describes how in succession issues, someone on the down curve is trying to work with someone

on the up curve.

“Until people understand that they often can’t see the other’s point of view. Older people don’t want more debt and younger one wants to develop and push forward, usually with more debt. And that causes tension.”

From the start, brothers or other siblings working together need to treat a farm and its decisions as business transactions.

“Treat it as you would with a separate third party – proper documents, shareholders agreements and those things all need to be put in place as if you were going into business with a non-family member. It clears up any misunderstandings that may happen.

“It takes money and effort but when you look at the end result of a disagreement, it’s infinitesimal of what the cost at the other end would be.

“Most family problems start with something small and grow into something big and that puts the asset in jeopardy. It puts everything in jeopardy because people start making wrong decisions.”

All family members need to understand what the arrangements are, including new or existing spouses and partners, Cranswick says. “Cover off more things than you need to and don’t leave anything to sort out later.”

There’s also compromise and understanding people’s different expectations – even with the simple things. Sometimes a gripe can start with someone saying they always wash the tractor down when they’re finished and the other person doesn’t. If something will drive you up the wall, decide whether to deal with it or leave it.

Auckland University lecturer Chris Brown, whose father farmed with his twin brother, is well aware of the strengths and pitfalls of the family farm.

Chris is passionate about family businesses – she works in the embryonic Family Business Research Group, the Family Firm Institute and the ICEHOUSE owner/manager and agribusiness programmes.

Planning is essential or in the case of a family on a farm – simply talking about where the business is at and where everyone wants it



to go, she says.

“A lot of plans sit in the owner/manager or farmer’s head and they assume everyone knows what’s going on.

“Having those conversations is all part of that planning process – not assuming the kids know or the parents know but having very explicit conversations the way you would in other businesses.

“And if that happens around the kitchen table, it’s still good. Some of the best planning is done there.”

Farming businesses are getting larger compared to the family-size farms of several generations ago but she doesn’t agree with suggestions of making family farms operate on a more formal or corporate basis, because the principles of good business stay the same.

“They have to be aware that size plays a part but as the business grows, it is more important to make sure you’re getting good advice, there’s good wisdom coming in...the whole governance side.

“And as soon as you say governance, people switch off but basically it’s where you go to get advice. A dairy farmer will go to a nutritionist to get expert advice on nutrition and so with any business, you need expert business advice.”



There's no double take when you see identical twins Duncan and Angus Brown together – 27 years of life experience has made them not as identical as they once were (Angus is the one with the broken nose).

In the case of Duncan and Angus Brown, Rick says there are real economic advantages of working together but the most important thing at the end of it is that family stays as family.

“Take heed of warnings so there are no misconceptions or misunderstandings about what’s expected.”

Partners add another level of complexity to family businesses, which is where the importance of documentation comes in, as often those people weren’t party to the original agreements.

Duncan’s still single but Angus has started a family with partner Rebecca since the start of their leasing arrangement.

Angus was stock manager on their uncle’s farm and Duncan was working overseas when the leasing opportunity arose. The uncle may have sold if the twins didn’t take on the property so the arrangements were done in Duncan’s absence. He returned at the end of 2004 and the lease began the following April.

They laugh that they fight too much to farm side by side on a daily basis, but as a partnership they lease about 600ha from their parents and the uncle in the Tararua farming district of Kumeroa.

Duncan looks after the 283ha home farm

(bought by their grandfather in the 1930s), including an 80ha milking platform (with a manager) and a 32ha run off. Angus has a sheep and beef block of about the same size, known as Kapple’s Block, and owns a neighbouring house and 1.6ha where he lives with Rebecca and their three children.

Hindsight has given the twins an

“**He gets on with what he has to do and I get on with what I have to do and every now and then we end up working together.**”

appreciation for the reasons for due diligence on properties before entering a lease agreement.

Duncan trusted the judgement shown by Angus but still would have liked to have personally gone through the process. They knew the land, they knew the machinery and they obviously knew the owners but there are still aspects they feel they should have had a

handle on first.

Initial monthly meetings went by the wayside pretty quickly and now the pair has settled into their own informal routine with Angus doing the accounts and Duncan in charge of loading information into their chosen computer programme.

“It took us 18 months to fathom how everything was going,” Angus says.

But that settling in period also gave them time to figure out the best way to work together. Duncan looks after the fertiliser programme but Angus does the lime. Angus buys the calf meal but Duncan buys the milk powder. Angus deals with the shearers but Duncan buys the rams and sells the wool.

“Having said that, we can work together when the farm needs us to work together,” Angus adds.

“He gets on with what he has to do and I get on with what I have to do and every now and then we end up working together, like crutching.”

The brothers grew up in nearby Kohinui, where their parents still farm with the help of their other son Hayden and daughter Fiona who has almost finished an agricultural degree at Massey University.

Angus has taken up beekeeping while Duncan's outlet is flying. Having a life outside of work is important.



The boys were always out on the farm - moving blackberry, shifting cows - and they claim to have been driving tractors when they were four (not far though obviously, adds Angus, and they wiped out a few strainer posts over the years too, says dad Terry.)

Four years of boarding at Feilding Agricultural High School saw them hang out for holidays and head straight home for the inevitable list of jobs - usually a week's worth of work to be done in two days.

Within six weeks of starting Year 12, Duncan was back on the farm.

"In my eyes I was going to be a farmer. Everything I did at school I was thinking how it was going to help me on the farm. I hung around at school for agriculture and science, they were the two subjects I was good at and worked hard at and would ultimately help me to be a good farmer."

With above average intelligence and the identical-twin thing to deal with, Angus and Duncan were often picked on - not outsiders but just different, they say, but at least they knew they'd never be on their own in a scrap.

They pulled some swift identity switches at school (although there was one teacher in particular they could never fool), but a broken nose put an end to that. Duncan had fended off Angus playing scrag on a dark winter's night after prep homework in Year 11. He also accidentally head butted Angus in a rugby game, which resulted in five stitches on the side

of his nose. (For those in the know, Duncan also has a small scar across the bridge of his nose from driving a go-kart into a concrete pillar on the woolshed when he was a pre-schooler.)

The pair played rugby through two southern winters while at Telford Rural Polytechnic in South Otago (both have a Certificate of Agriculture and Diploma in Rural Business).

They're probably still arguing over who decided to go there first but they both agree it was a great experience covering dairy, sheep, beef, bees, deer and equestrian. Having lots of practical time and on-farm work experience suited the two farming sons and Angus was runner up best student for both years.

“They'll give anything a go. You turned your back and hoped like hell they did the job. They did.**”**

They're both modest too - they didn't tell their parents they were getting any awards at their first Telford prize giving, then "cleaned up" according to their father, Terry.

A man of few words, he says the boys are "doing well" and yes, he's proud of them.

"They have always been keen to have a go at anything. They'll give anything a go. You turned your back and hoped like hell they did the job. They did."

Gaining experience outside the influence of their parents also broadened the boys' views.

Angus spent some time shepherding in NZ before heading to Alberta, Canada, then the UK through Agriventure, the International Agricultural Exchange Association. That experience led to him becoming the

organisation's representative for the lower North Island.

The twins have hosted Young Farmers international exchangees and also IAEA Agriventure trainees from places like Canada, Germany, the UK and Scandinavia - and love it, particularly as they've both been hosted overseas themselves.

As well as working casually around the district, Duncan spent three summers driving tractors for a local contractor. He was pruning trees when glandular fever knocked him over for a few months then it was off to Sedgewick, Alberta, in Canada with IAEA (following me, laughs Angus) then to Lincolnshire, England, where the wolds just didn't cut it as hills (he said he felt more at home as soon as he saw Scotland).

When they came back to work on the same property together, the sibling rivalry spilled over into healthy competition that found an outlet in Young Farmers.

Competition is hot between the twins and they both like to win. But they don't mind when they're beaten by the other (so they say in public). Their favourite form of competition these days is the Young Farmer Contest where they have both convened district finals and competed both on their own and against each other in regional finals.

Duncan convened the 2007 regional final in Pahiataua and had to ban his brother from his house and from the section around the house, as well as signing special waivers, so there was no chance of collusion.

"It was a trust thing. I had to be fair with everything. If I had gone easy on Angus and he won the regional then he probably would have been smoked at grand final."

For the record, Angus came third that year

behind eventual national winner Callum Thomsen.

“It’s not a conscious decision to compete against each other, but the desire to have a go. And to get the free shirt and hat,” says Angus.

“And you get bragging rights,” adds Duncan.

Both Angus and Duncan would like to make a grand final before they hit the 31-year cutoff age in 2013.

“I’d love to get that far. I’d love to win it. In all fairness, I’d love to see Duncan there too,” says Angus.

“Both of us. Give it a crack. Go down trying.” **YC**

10 tips to working with family

1. Make sure both sides are getting independent expert advice with entering an agreement.
2. Make an effort to understand the age and stage of the other party.
3. Treat the farm and its decisions as business transactions, as if it were a separate third party.
4. Be detailed and accurate in documentation.
5. All family members need to understand what the arrangements are, including new or existing spouses and partners.
6. At meetings, cover off more things than you need to and don’t leave anything to sort out later.
7. Make sure you plan so you’re heading for the same goals in the same direction.
8. Compromise.
9. Don’t assume the other party knows what you’re thinking.
10. It may be business, but family is the most important thing.



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