

FIELD DAY RESOURCE GUIDE

Family Farm Labor



SHARKAR FARMS

Sharon Ostrowski owns and operates SharKar Farm in China, Michigan. The 18-acre farm produces a variety of crops, everything from watermelon cucumbers to 200+ varieties of succulents, which are available at six different farmers markets in southeast Michigan and at the SharKar Farm Store. Since the farm started in 1999, all of Sharon's seven children have worked on the farm and many of them continue to participate in some role today, either harvesting tomatoes in the hoophouse, fixing the farm equipment, or selling at the farmers market.

TIPS FROM THE FARMER

- 1. Sometimes you are the boss and sometimes you are the mom, and you may need to be explicit about which position you are speaking from.**

Occasionally you may need to share feedback with your children, or another relative working on the farm, based on their relationship to you as an employee. Stating that this feedback is coming from you as a supervisor - not as a family member - is an important way to distance the comment from your interpersonal relationship and ensure they hear the comment through a lens of how they will change their behavior in a present and/or future work setting.
- 2. Scheduling work times can be more complex when working with family members.**

You are more likely to want to make accommodations for schedule interruptions when working with family members. Because you know how important academic, sports, camps, and social activities are to your family members, you may be more accommodating than you may be with an employee that is not related to you. Recognize this bias and prepare for it by setting clear expectations to ensure equity across all employees and to ensure that the farm's labor needs are being met.
- 3. Recognize the unique interests and strengths of each employee to match them up with the tasks where they are most likely to thrive.**

Working with family members gives you the unique advantage of knowing your employees really well. You probably know their strengths and their weaknesses by the time they start working for you and this can help you best match them with tasks they are well suited for. Use this awareness to maximize their impact on your farm!



RESOURCES

- 1. Managing Stress for Farmers and Farm Families.** Michigan State University Extension.
Michigan State University Extension provides a short guide on how to manage stress and introduces the B-R-A-I-N method for mindfulness while working on the farm. This is part of a broader library of resources provided by MSU Extension, accessible at www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress.
- 2. But They're Family!** Stanley Moore, Michigan State University Extension, 2018.
Moore discusses the unique challenges and benefits that come with working with family on the farm. Moore provides tips and questions to help farmers determine if working with family is a good fit for their business.
- 3. Agricultural Jobs – YouthRules!** US Department of Labor.
The YouthRules! website is geared towards a younger audience and outlines the federal labor laws around agricultural workers from ages under 12, 12 or 13, 14 or 15, and 16 and older.
- 4. 5 Challenges for Family-Owned Businesses.** Barbara Weltman, U.S. Small Business Administration, 2018.
This article gives an overview of five major challenges that one may encounter when building and operating a family business. The suggestions provided by the author are simple to read and easy to implement.