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Resolving Conflicts More Effectively

One of the roles of the Farmers' Advocate Office (FAO) is to assist farmers and ranchers in resolving rural disputes. In communities around the world, the third Thursday in every October is Conflict Resolution Day. In recognition of this occasion, we've pulled together a few tips that can help you resolve conflicts more effectively:

- **Say What You Mean, But Don't Be Mean**

Different people will approach conflict in different ways. Some personalities will confront it head on and speak their mind. Others will quietly dance around it, hoping it will resolve itself and sometimes resorting to passive-aggressive behaviours. For some people, it's "my way or the highway," while others will undermine their needs and wants in the face of conflict. When we are seeking to improve our conflict resolution skills, the goal is to become a balance of forthright and gentle, assertive and flexible.

It is important to be honest about what is bothering us, but not every way of being direct is constructive. If we communicate how an action makes us feel, we stand the chance of stimulating empathy and understanding from the other party.

Another helpful trick is removing the "yous" – *you did this, you said that, you are* – and replacing them with a more neutral picture of the issue. "You" statements can make the other person feel blame and shame, which tend to escalate conflict rather than calm it. Sometime this type of re-wording requires a bit of verbal gymnastics, but it is very effective.

- **Breathe**

Maybe you're skeptical: yes, *that all sounds good on paper, but is this actually possible in real life...?* Something that helps increase your ability to resolve conflict effectively is taking a "time out" when temperatures are rising. Postpone important conversations if you're feeling ready to blow up. Take time alone (to breathe, not stew) before confronting the other party. Breathing helps connect the emotional and rational parts of our brains.

- **Listen Like a Cow**

In conflict resolution, we try to say things more effectively when our mouths are open and to listen more effectively when our mouths are closed. There's a million was to explain what good listening looks like, but Mary Rose O'Reilly says it best:

"Pay attention...Just be there. Don't be thinking about a solution, or how you should fix it. Just listen hard and try to be present. It's very bad business to invite heartfelt speech and then not listen...What I'm trying to construct here is a theory of attention that depends little on therapeutic skills and formal training: listening like a cow.

Those of you who grew up in the country know that cows are good listeners...We don't need fixing, most of us, as much as we need a warm space and a good cow. Cows cock their big brown eyes at you and twitch their ears when you talk. This is a great antidote to the critical listening that goes on in academia, where we listen for the mistake, the flaw in the argument. Cows, by contrast, manage at least the appearance of deep, openhearted attention."

Please call the FAO at 310-FARM (3276) if you have any questions.