Kari Robideau:

Hello, you are listening to the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development podcast. My name is Kari Robideau and I'm an extension educator. Thank you for joining us in our second podcast in our series on youth in agriculture. In today's topic, we're going to be discussing Generation Z working on the farm, and specifically around communication between generations. Now, joining me for this conversation, once again, are Samantha Lahman and Joe Rand, both extension educators. Thanks for joining me again, you guys.

Samantha Lahman:

Thanks for having us back, Kari.

Joe Rand:

Yep. Excited to be here.

Kari Robideau:

Our discussion today, as I mentioned, is going to focus around the generational differences, and hopefully, we'll see some similarities too.

Joe Rand:

Yeah, so today we're going to focus on communication overall, and then some specific examples of ways we need to work on communication between our employers and employees, specifically related to our Gen Z workforce. So the first thing we'll talk about are just some, how do we give detailed instructions for doing work or assigning tasks, and setting those expectations ahead of time so that we set our young people up for success and to minimize stress. The second is how do those that we employ like to give feedback or get feedback. Next, establishing norms for how our employees can ask questions. Then we'll move on to social media use and setting some ground rules.

Kari Robideau:

Before we move on, for those listeners who did not join us in the first podcast in this series, Samantha, will you just take a moment to define for us, who is Generation Z? Who are we talking about here?

Samantha Lahman:

Sure thing. So Generation Z is our latest and greatest to be entering our workforce. So these are youth and now young adults, typically born between 1997 and present. And there's just over 72.8 million of them, so they're going to be making up about 25% of our population. As we welcome Gen Z onto the workforce, it's important that we note those similarities and differences to millennials, to boomers, to Generation Xers, and how we interact with them in farm and work settings.

Kari Robideau:

Yep, thank you for that. As we move into this conversation, as Joe had outlined the aspects of communication, we have Generation Z coming to work on our farm, and we also have multi-generations that maybe have different ways of thinking about how to communicate. I can imagine that it can be challenging.

Samantha Lahman:

It definitely is. And we hear from producers all of the time and those that are in the workforce that sometimes it seems like we're training or we're communicating with young people that speak a completely different language than we do. So when we think about what is that language, I think for the most advanced farmer, it's kind of a mix between hand signals and mumbles. So for the most part, our introduction to this style of communication usually comes shortly after we're first able to reach the pedals of the farm truck.

Samantha Lahman:

So for me, the first experience really still clear in my memory, being told the slide over into the driver's seat while dad got out to open the barn door. And you guessed it, it's my first time, it's my turn backing up that trailer for the first time to the barn. I remember, in the dark, window cranked down so I could hear him, rain pouring in that driver's side window, trying to translate in real time as my dad made a series of hand signals and motions that would have made any major league baseball pitching coach really proud. I don't pride myself on being a fast learner, but I really quickly connected that mumbles mean keep going. Grunts mean you're doing it wrong. And there are very subtle differences between turn the wheel to the left and the trailer needs to come left.

Samantha Lahman:

So this language that we think about and all of us can chuckle about can be learned and translated, but that takes time and it takes experience. So for those that are young and new to the farming community, this is a major barrier that amplifies existing generational tensions. So when we're welcoming new Gen Z hires, it's crucial to approach things like on-farm training and development with a plan that goes into a lot more detail than you might be used to.

Joe Rand:

Sam, that totally resonates. I have a dad who gave similar instructions. It wasn't about a trailer. It was about a boat on a trailer, and that turning the wheel to the left or making the trailer go to the left was the difference between hitting the side of the garage door or the dock. So that resonates with me, absolutely.

Joe Rand:

So as we think about all this communication stuff, let's talk about, how do we give detailed instructions to young people once we hire them so that they understand what the expectations are, so that nobody gets frustrated, or at least we diminish the frustration that can happen.

Samantha Lahman:

Great question, Joe. So it really starts with clear communication. And when we think about clear communication, we think about what are preferred methods of communication, because we all know that we learn differently. Some of us learn by doing, by hearing, by reading. So it's really important that we talk to the youth about, how would you like to be communicated with?

Samantha Lahman:

And for Gen Z, there's a particular way that they like to be communicated with. So when we think about giving clear and detailed instructions, it really starts with communication in general and recognizing

communication as how are their preferred methods of being communicated with. So working with Gen Z in particular and the young people you're going to be employing to find out what their preferred methods of communication are.

Kari Robideau:

So what better way to find out how Generation Z wants to be communicated with than to ask them? So we had a willing participant from the Generation Z group who also works on a farm answer some of these questions for us. So the very first one we asked him about was, how are you most comfortable communicating with an employer? And then, Samantha and Joe, I'll have you respond to his comment after it's done. Here it is.

Speaker 4:

Texting is the easiest, because it gives you a second or two to think about or communicate with other people.

Samantha Lahman:

What a great example. I think right away, as this young man goes, "Texting," I don't think there's anybody listening that went, "Oh, that's a surprise." But as we think about, I think he really hit home on why texting is preferred. So I have time to reread it. I have time to understand it. I have time to think about my response. This is a very thoughtful generation. They want to make sure they're doing things correctly the first time. And that answer goes right along with what we can expect from having Gen Z in our workforce.

Joe Rand:

Well, and as you think about that too, if we think about ages and stages and where the brain development is at for these young people, they need that extra moment to process information in order to respond in a respectful way, and that's what they want to do.

Samantha Lahman:

So when we know that texting is perhaps their preferred method of communication, it's important that we set ground rules with these new employees. Is texting, tweeting, communicating in that way okay during the work day? If that's their preferred method of communication, it certainly should be something that you try to provide for them, but that doesn't mean that we don't set ground rules of, these are typically the times of day that we can communicate, or here are specific times when you cannot be on your device or texting. If there's an emergency, do not send a text to me as the employer. Call. That's a time when we need to make that call. Don't wait, don't rely on that form of communication, and when that can be done throughout the day.

Joe Rand:

I think there's also advantages to being able to communicate via text or in a variety of ways that employers can utilize and build on. So if you're out in the tractor and it's loud, or you're working in the shop and it's loud, you can send a text when you might not be able to talk on the phone.

Kari Robideau:

Good point.

Joe Rand:

So, Sam, now that we've talked a little bit about how to communicate effectively, an important part of that is how we give and receive feedback from our employers. So with regard to Gen Zers, how do they like to receive feedback and how do we go about doing that?

Samantha Lahman:

One of the things that we're seeing in Gen Z in particular that is fairly similar to millennials, there isn't a whole lot that is super similar, but this is one of them, is that Gen Z is expecting continual feedback. They're expecting to hear from you fairly frequently. They're hoping to gather feedback, because like we said, they're borderline perfectionists. They want to do this correctly the first time. So if there's any problems or issues, they're expecting that feedback so that they can make those corrections.

Kari Robideau:

Let's hear from our young person again. We asked him, how should your supervisor give you feedback? Here's what he said.

Speaker 4:

I'd say after every job, whatever you're doing, just to see how you did and if you're doing something wrong or if you can do something better.

Joe Rand:

So Sam, that sounds exactly like the example you gave us.

Samantha Lahman:

Yeah. I think he knocks it out of the park with that answer of explaining why, again, of, I expect feedback. I'd like to have it after every task that you assign me. I want to hear back about it. We think about times when, maybe in our own jobs or in our own lives, we've made a mistake or we haven't caught it or corrected it immediately. We certainly don't want to hear about that mistake a week or a month later, because then we're racking our brains to try to go back and remember what we've done. We think about how fast this generation is moving and how quickly things move on farms, being able to make those productive critiques right away so that they can right away result in tangible changes to either behavior, a task or an assignment that they have is really crucial.

Joe Rand:

Well, and I think it only builds the relationship between the employer and employee too, which can help them do a better job, especially when they may not understand the task they've been given, because it opens the line of communication.

Samantha Lahman:

Exactly, Joe. I think of another example of millennials and Gen Z as being fairly similar. When you're being given feedback, if it's not something that is fairly continual, whether good or bad, everybody has gotten that email or that call from the boss or the supervisor, saying, "Hey, come see me." And if you're frequently communicating with them, this isn't a scary thing. If this is something that typically you only remember being contacted or being given feedback when something has gone wrong, that can be

extremely stressful. And we think about that stress that this generation would carry and youth at their age carrying, that's a lot to expect from a young employee.

Joe Rand:

Okay. Sam. So we've talked about communication, setting expectations, opening a feedback loop. How do we establish some norms for asking questions, for understanding all the tasks we've been given and the expectations that have been set by our boss?

Samantha Lahman:

Great question. We've been talking about communication being so key and establishing, I think, Joe, you mentioned that relationship-building between employee and employer. A lot can rely on that ability to ask questions, that feeling open, feeling comfortable with being unsure in an environment, especially on a farming environment where they may be coming in with little to absolutely no knowledge about a task that they're being given.

Samantha Lahman:

So when we think about establishing those norms, think about some things like when and how should employees ask questions? Is it okay for them to text you while they're completing a task? Or do you just expect that if they don't know how to do it and it was on the checklist, they can just skip the task and talk to you about it later, or just say, "Oh, I didn't do that because I didn't know how." And we think that, that question when I first asked it of a producer, he was like, "Well, that's absolutely ridiculous. I don't want you to just skip the assignment that I gave you."

Samantha Lahman:

And I kind of laugh about it, because it brings to mind a friend who asked their younger son to clean out a very specific corner of the chicken coop. And after two days, it still hadn't been done. So he'd been the patient father, asked his son, "Why is this corner of the chicken coop not clean yet?" And his response was that he didn't know where the shovel was. So we can laugh about it now. We can think that it is very funny, but it was the simple answer in his son's mind of, I don't know where the shovel is, so I can't do it. And obviously, not being comfortable or knowing that, yeah, I needed to ask that question so the task could still get done.

Samantha Lahman:

So we think about excessive detail really benefits someone in Gen Z and anyone new coming onto the farm. And it's going to help you ensure that tasks are completed to the standard that you're expecting.

Joe Rand:

So that makes me wonder, in addition to just giving detailed instructions, do our employers need to help teach the young people how to do the task?

Samantha Lahman:

I think certainly there is always a level of education that comes with any job, some really great education, others maybe not as beneficial. But especially when you're in a position like this, where it's typically a family-run, more casual type setting for a workforce, there are so many things that we are training youth on, not just agriculture as a whole or safety around farming practices, engineering, animal

sciences, agronomy. There are those professional skills, life skills that we also have the ability to make a really significant impact on a young person's life.

Joe Rand:

And when they're doing that teaching, when they're giving them the instructions, that's another channel of communication open, and it helps us establish those norms between the employer and the employee.

Kari Robideau:

I think these are really good points about, not only are you employing this young person, but they're learning so much from you as well. And on a farm, and Samantha and I both grew up on a farm, we know nothing is ever, typically, nothing is ever as simple as go clean the corner of the coop, right? There's usually a lot of other steps involved. Our Generation Z, and especially those who aren't always on a farm, that's not intuitive to know exactly what those steps are. In light of that story and in thinking about why we need to offer these tasks, we asked our young person, if you were told to put the lawnmower away, what would you do? Here's what he said.

Speaker 4:

I'd have to make sure I know exactly where to put it and put it in the right space. I don't want you to have to go and move it into another place because I put it in the wrong spot. How I should shut the lawnmower down. I'd say that's pretty much it.

Kari Robideau:

All right. So, Samantha, if you are the farmer, was there something else you were thinking?

Samantha Lahman:

I'm thinking, what a great example of a few of the things that we've been talking about? So the first thing that this young man says is I want to make sure, again, that I'm doing it right. Exactly where do I need to put the lawnmower away?

Samantha Lahman:

But other things that I'm thinking right away in my mind, as I started making a checklist, if I tell a young person to go put the mower away, here's what I expect, which is different than what I asked. I expect that you clean the deck of the mower or blow out all the leftover grass or leaves that are in the mower. I expect that you refill the gas tank. I expect that you're going to back it into the shed, not drive it into the shed. I expect that you're going to put the cover on once it's cooled down. And I also expect that you're going to lock and close the shed door, which of course are none of the things that I asked this young person to do.

Kari Robideau:

No. How was I supposed to know that from, "Put the lawnmower away?"

Samantha Lahman:

Exactly. And so, we see a young person doing the best they can with the instructions given. Yep, I'm going to ask to make sure I know where it goes and I'm going to make sure I know how to shut it down.

So I've done the two things you've told me to do. I put it in the shed where you told me to and I turned it off.

Kari Robideau:

So instead of getting frustrated, maybe taking that step back and say, okay, what instructions did I give? What expectations did I provide? What were the steps, or did I just say, "Will you put the lawn mower away?"

Joe Rand:

Well, so we've talked about communication in a variety of ways, but what we haven't talked about yet is the use of social media, which is a really, really big part of the lives of Gen Zers. So Sam, what do we need to think about when we are thinking about social media use in the workplace and on the farm?

Samantha Lahman:

Right. So Gen Zs are the natives when it comes to social media. They have never lived in a world without it. There are some really scary numbers that they can show of, the new Gen Zers are being born after the invention of the iPhone. And I remember the very first iPod coming out or the bag phone that my dad got that was cutting edge that got plugged into the Ford Ranger, you know? And so, these things are now antiques or things that they look at and refer to as vintage.

Samantha Lahman:

What we know is that over 90% of Gen Z are active on social media and they're using multiple platforms. So there's a good chance they will have a Twitter and an Instagram and a TikTok, potentially a YouTube and a Snapchat and a Facebook. So sharing videos and photos of their lives publicly is completely commonplace. So employers have to have a really clear communication on the use of social media on their operation.

Samantha Lahman:

And just like we talked about, when is it okay to be texting on the operation, we need to have that same conversation when it comes to social media. So when is it okay, and what is okay to post online and share for their job? Is it okay with your operation to share a selfie while preg checking? Why is it not okay to video the disposal of a carcass? So explaining some of those things to someone, again, who isn't a part of an active farming operation, isn't coming from that background, why we can make things educational moments to share on social media. We can also post funny things. But thinking through that, how is someone with even less knowledge than they now have going to be viewing that openly and online?

Samantha Lahman:

Gen Z is really passionate about what they do. And referring to our previous podcast in the series, we talked about how Gen Z wants to make a difference and contribute to something greater. So sharing what they're doing publicly is part of that desire. So they want to share what they are doing. So it's really important that you help them understand the best way to do that. So things like sharing positive interactions, positive farming practices, cutting edge technology is a great way to assist your operation and the ag community as a whole.

Joe Rand:

Yeah, and I feel like those are skills that farmers and employers could tap into of their young people and they maybe haven't thought of them before. But how could having some kind of social media presence for your operation help your business? And what person are you already employing that could help you do that? So there actually are some skills there that you could tap into, in addition to having that conversation about what's appropriate and when.

Samantha Lahman:

I think there's so many great benefits of having, especially, these young people and very tech savvy people on your operation, and how do we utilize that? How do we talk about it? How are we able to move past that what and why and into how do we use this beneficially? And when we talked to a few producers about social media policies, or what were some things that they would be concerned about or excited about, one of the things that they talked about was just not knowing exactly how to frame that. Because a lot of the times, when we're talking about things that you can't film or you shouldn't be sharing, or things that could be interpreted incorrectly, those are all just such negatives.

Samantha Lahman:

So one of the ideas that they came together and talked about was providing a statement to new employees that stresses that they're expected to positively support the operation by ensuring that all animals are healthy, farming practices are safe, that all employees are treated with respect. And so, if they have any of those questions or concerns, that they need to bring those to farm management. So we talked about setting those expectations for asking questions. Whether or not you can post something on social media or how you post it on social media, I should say, is all part of that setting expectations and being able to freely ask those questions and go from there.

Joe Rand:

Sam, we've talked about a lot of things today, but really important things, ways to communicate with Gen Zers that may not have a lot of experience working on the farm, but that they're a crucial part of the future workforce in ag. Did you have any final things that you wanted to share with us before we end the podcast today?

Samantha Lahman:

I would say my final piece of advice, probably the most important thing you can take away from this podcast today, is do not let your new employee's first tasks be backing up a trailer.

Kari Robideau:

Thank you, Samantha, and thank you, Joe. We will wrap up this podcast now. Please go visit our website at www.extension.umn.edu/youth. We have research-based information and training opportunities for youth development professionals and volunteers on that site.

Kari Robideau:

And please continue this conversation with Samantha on her blog post called Gen Z New Employee Training. You can go there, read her blog post, comment. Whether you are commenting on some things we said here in this podcast or what she wrote in that blog, we'd love to continue the conversation with you.

Kari Robideau:

And I would just like to say a very special thank you to both of you for joining me again today.

Joe Rand:

Absolutely.

Samantha Lahman:

Thank you so much for having us, Kari.

Kari Robideau:

And we will be back again, where we are going to talk about LGBTQ youth in agriculture. This is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.