

## Tips for Approaching Courageous Conversations

Prepared by Tracy Sides

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### Background

Initiating or shifting conversations about farmland management can be challenging for any number of reasons for both farmland owners and tenants. However, effective communication between a landowner and tenant is essential to creating a lease agreement that meets the needs of both parties and to supporting a positive, ongoing relationship. Key to effective communication is a willingness to engage in conversations that might be uncomfortable, but you know are necessary to realize the outcomes that are important to you. This is why they are often called “courageous” conversations – they require us to choose that something (e.g., land stewardship) is more important to us than fear or discomfort. The good news is that engaging in courageous conversations is a skill everyone can develop and no one ever masters – so we’re all just doing the best that we can.

### PREPARATION TIPS

- Consider your context
  - Have you identified your values and desired outcomes in relation to your farmland?
  - What is your current relationship with the tenant? Do you have a verbal or written lease?
  - Do you know the tenant’s land management practices on your farmland?
  - What is your current level of knowledge regarding agricultural terms and concepts and regenerative practices? Do you know where to look for more information?
- Know where you want to go – What are your values and vision for your farmland?
  - Many tools exist to assist with clarifying your short and long-term goals for your farmland; be sure to include all owners in arriving at a shared vision for the farmland – this may involve a separate or parallel series of conversations
- Start with the first step
  - Moving from farmland vision to reality will take time and ongoing conversations between landowner and tenant or potential tenant
  - Your first step will depend on your context, but will no doubt be followed by more steps. Consider what your purpose for a first or renewed conversation will be. The next conversation will be informed by the outcomes of the first conversation. The path from vision to reality is never a straight line.
  - Create a welcoming environment for a first conversation. Suggestions: meet in-person, enjoy some food or coffee/tea together, avoid intoxicating substances, pay attention to your body language and try to keep it comfortable and engaged (for typical U.S. culture, examples include: face the other person, make occasional eye contact, avoid slouching over, lean in slightly)
  - Share your purpose for the conversation when you make the invitation (an example from a non-farming landowner: *“George, I’d like to invite you over for some coffee and conversation. We’ve never really talked too much and I’d like for us to get to know each other better and to understand how things are going for you on the farm. Is there a good time this week for you to stop by the house?”*)

## CONVERSATION TIPS

- **Maintain self-awareness** – Pay attention to your internal reactions and be intentional about your external responses (verbal and nonverbal). Also be aware of the impact of your responses on the other person(s) in the conversation.
- **Reinforce the positive** – If there are things your tenant does for the farmland or your family that you appreciate, tell her/him. People are more likely to remain engaged when they feel seen and valued.
- **Seek first to understand** – Be curious (rather than making assumptions) about your tenant’s situation and perspective. Try your best to ask questions without an intent to change or shame the other person.
- **Actively listen** – Avoid interrupting the other person. Repeat back what you heard to confirm understanding. Really pay attention to what they are saying; this shows respect and may illuminate aspects of their perspective that can be a connecting point.
- **Speak your truth** – Your truth is valid and is an important component of a courageous conversation with your tenant/landlord. It is also important to recognize that the other person has their own truth, which is also an important component of a courageous conversation.
- **Celebrate participation** – Find opportunities to express gratitude for their time and perspectives.
- **Laughter is the best medicine** – As feels natural to you, laughing *at yourself* or *with others* can help ease tension.
- **Be willing to be uncomfortable** – Courageous conversations are named so because there is risk that things won’t go as planned, conflict may surface - we may get anxious, start to feel out of control. Our instinct is usually to avoid and turn away from the unplanned event. If we can stay in our “stretch zone”, relax and see what opportunities may arise, these “stretch” moments sometimes precede a breakthrough into new connections or possibilities.
- **Ensure a “Good” ending** – Even if this means accepting non-closure for the conversation, perhaps as part of an ongoing dialogue or because, together, you chose to pause. Make sure things feel complete to both parties. If not, and you are out of time, be sure to schedule another time to complete the conversation.