

This Dispatch looks at a difficult but important issue in family business: mental health. Alleah draws upon her experience dealing with severely mentally ill people to apply some timely lessons for family business. Bill recalls the story of King Saul from the Bible to give a striking and fresh take on the mental health challenges of the first King of Israel. Enjoy our thoughts, pass them along and please reply if you have comments.

Shh! We Don't Talk About That... Mental Health in Agriculture

By [Alleah Heise](#)

When I started down the road of obtaining a college degree, it took a couple of tries to find what suited me. Finally, I settled on dual degrees in political science (pre-law) and psychology. I knew obtaining these degrees charted a lifelong course of serving others through some of life's most difficult challenges. After graduating from OSU, I accepted a position as a Community Psychiatric Support Treatment case manager. My clients were severely and persistently mentally ill, and my job was primarily to assist them in developing coping skills and a stable living situation as a part of long-term symptom management and personal happiness. Working with that population, surprisingly, provided an invaluable backdrop for facilitating conversations on mental health in the agricultural world. Though our attitude historically regarding mental health issues is "Shh! We Don't Talk About That," our growing realization is that people in agriculture may suffer from mental health problems in excess of the national average (one in five people). Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social health, and while many of us think of diagnoses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, the fact is that mental health also includes depression, anxiety, and other far more common experiences.

The [dairy sector](#) provides an interesting case study on mental health in agriculture. Dairy farmers have experienced revenues well below their cost of production for several years in a row. They are being targeted with suicide prevention programs as desperation and fear about how to provide for their families grows. Did you know farmers, as a group, have [a higher suicide rate](#) than any other occupation?

Those of us involved in agriculture, and not just dairy, are just as susceptible to mental health challenges. Many of our farms and ranches are located in rural areas. Profits are tied to the market, which on its best day can be unpredictable. Many farmers and ranchers spend a majority of their time alone as they work land and cattle. The more time any of us spend alone, the harder it can be to "plug back in" to friendships or discussions in our communities. We are more likely to distance ourselves emotionally which leaves us with more time to consider our fears and assumptions, and even make up stories about what is happening around us with friends and loved ones. Lack of interaction leads to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and decreased self-esteem. Layer on top of these symptoms a historical culture of "just work harder" and "don't show emotions" and the stage is set for mental health issues to thrive.

What can we do to make it easier to talk about mental health in our industry? A March 2018 article from [Harvard Business Review](#) helps us by acknowledging that mental health issues in business are normal and that facing these issues, rather than avoiding them, will help not just the individuals affected, but the business, too.



As a group that takes extra care to produce the best crops and livestock in the world, it is high time we take time to nurture our best people, too. If you or someone on your team needs help, check out what local resources are available to start the conversation. Don't wait to make the most important investment of all – OUR PEOPLE!

Faith and Family Business: The Mental Torment of King Saul (I Samuel)

By [Bill Long](#)

Most religious people were taught a negative assessment of King Saul, the first king of Israel. After all, he repeatedly disobeyed the instructions of Samuel the Prophet, repeatedly tried to kill his anointed successor David, and called upon the departed spirit of Samuel (prohibited in ancient Israel) to get advice on battle strategy. Yet when we adjust our glasses and take another look at Saul, from the perspective of our current knowledge of mental health, a different picture emerges. We see him as a man who, though called by God, was in over his head, without the temperament or skills to navigate this new institution called kingship. In fact, as we look at him more closely, we see that his life offers lessons and raises questions for those in family business today, especially those who live their lives under considerable pressure. See if you or others you know face any of the following...

Lack of “Fit” Between Person and Position: It may sound obvious that there *should be* a fit between the demands of a high-ranking position and the person who fills that position. A king has to lead and protect people as well as see that justice is done. After a few victories, Saul's impatient temperament and impetuous commands to his troops (eat nothing on the march) came out. It culminated in a conflict with the prophet Samuel about war strategy. Though we have no indication at this point that Saul is mentally afflicted, we see that mismatch of skills, conflicts and unwise decisions are already undermining his ability to lead. Is there mismatch of people and position in your world?

An Irreparable Breach with an Important Ally: Saul was told by Samuel that an enemy, because of their past treatment of Israel, needed to be exterminated. Saul defeated them but spared their leader and many of their choice animals. Though he later repented of this action, the damage was done. Samuel was told to go and find a replacement for Saul; never again would their relationship be repaired. The language of Scripture takes on an ominous tone: “the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him” (I Sam 16:14). Losing one's biggest and most powerful supporter is described in this language of mental oppression. Have you or others you know lost a crucial supporter?

The Meteoric Rise of a Younger Star—David: When Saul heard the following song, he snapped: “Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands.” David, a young and rather inexperienced soldier, stole the hearts and minds of the people. Everyone wanted to be with David, to praise him, to celebrate his achievements. Saul, still in the prime years of life, was overwhelmed by the change in public opinion. Over the next several chapters in I Samuel he devised strategies to kill David. His paranoia grew by the day, and his military campaigns were compromised because he spent more time trying to get David than attack the Philistines. Unwise decisions multiplied and finally, in his exhaustion and torment, he called up the spirit of the deceased Samuel. Shortly thereafter, he died on the battlefield, run through with his shield-bearer's sword.

Saul faced bigger challenges than most of us. Yet his swift descent into mental torment relates to factors we can identify: taking on a challenge too large, losing an important ally, being upstaged by someone else. Are the lessons from Saul's sad story reflected in the life of someone you know?

