**Establishing good communication channels in a land partnership**

Legal agreements are an important part of the land-partnership process but they are seen as a follow-on to the formulation of a good business deal. Even more crucial is the process of forming and maintaining sound business-to-business relationships.

The partnership approach to agreements is based on trust, openness and a balanced agreement that genuinely respects both parties’ interests. Open communication between the parties will immediately multiply the chances of success.

There should be a mutual understanding that the business environment is dynamic, and that flexibility needs to be built into the approach. For example, new opportunities arise, markets fluctuate, technology evolves, consumer expectations change, and so on.

According to the *Land Partnerships Handbook* some of the important things that lead to a sustainable and long-lasting relationship are:

* An open and frank relationship that builds and maintains trust
* Common objectives – understanding and respecting each other’s interests
* Ensure regular dialogue throughout the agreement and not just leaving it until the official review date
* Keep notes of suggestions, ideas and requests which may lead to any alteration of the agreement longer term
* Flexibility – being open to new ideas
* Willingness to learn from experience
* Recognising and valuing interdependence – sharing problems

Open communication helps limit misunderstandings and leads to greater satisfaction for all parties

**Tips for maintaining good communication:**

When entering into an agreement as a landlord or tenant, it’s vital that the agreement is produced by BOTH parties and is followed by regular face-to-face communication, as well as emails and letters.

* Transparency is key. Both parties need to be honest about any changes that may be needed, or any other developments that could affect either party.
* Being flexible in the way you approach things according to changing conditions or priorities is also really important.
* Have compassion and empathy for each other’s position. Compassion is the act of feeling sympathy for a party in need and empathy is the act of understanding the other person’s perspective. You can develop these skills by imagining what feelings they might have in the face of a sudden change. For example, a crop failure after a bad weather event may necessitate a change in tack and more flexibility from the landlord.
* Self-awareness is also crucial - Self-awareness also helps a business admit to mistakes and learn what its strengths are. Acknowledging errors and showing your landlord the steps you're taking to fix them can help you build more trust.
* Discuss and agree when and how is best to communicate e.g. if there are times that are not suitable to be contacted, or if a party would always prefer to be contacted by phone rather than email then try and respect to these preferences.
* Do what you have said you will do! Whether this is in your tenancy, agreed business plan, land cultivation methods, crop plans – delivering what you have said you will do will build trust and confidence in the relationship. Of course, not everything goes to plan so keep communication lines open and update or discuss changes of plans at the soonest opportunity.

**Managing Difficult Conversations**

There will sometimes be occasions where you need to have a difficult conversation with your landlord or your tenant. None of us likes having to face a challenging discussion but they should not be avoided. Burying your head in the sand will potentially only make the problem get bigger and more difficult to resolve. Sometimes issues crop up without warning but more often than not, there are early warning signs and you can help make the conversation less difficult by having a quiet word at the first sign of something being amiss.

The key to mastering challenging conversations is control. You need to control the situation by putting clear boundaries in place (i.e. stick to the point and don’t expand it) and by controlling your emotions. Your aim should be to reach a mutually agreeable solution to the problem.

Tackling an issue or problem you feel strongly about can take us out of our comfort zone – perhaps you are worried that the conversation will turn into a confrontation, or it will not go as planned. This sense of anxiety is a completely normal response to a challenging situation and it’s usually an indication that you feel you are not in complete control. To try to assuage this feeling, make sure you have the full facts or at least as many as you can before the meeting.

Perhaps you are worried that the meeting will get emotional – are you in control of your own emotions? What if the other party gets upset or angry?

They key thing is to make sure you are well prepared.

* Plan the meeting in advance.
* Make sure you can have an open conversation somewhere private.
* Think about what you would like the outcome of the meeting to be. Is it an improvement in performance or perhaps a change in behaviour?
* Check your understanding with the other party – there may be additional information of which you are not aware.
* Use questioning skills and active listening to make sure you have understood the other party’s points
* Don’t rush the conversation – give the other party time to reflect on what you have to say, and vice versa
* Aim to agree a positive way forward.

This framework for handling challenging conversations has been adapted from the ACAS guide *Challenging Conversations and How to Manage Them*

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| Introduction – set the right tone | ● Begin the conversation by explaining the purpose of the meeting  ● Set out the structure of the meeting  ● Adopt a calm and professional manner  ● Don’t be afraid of referring to your notes, it will help you stay in control  ● Remember to focus on the issue and not the person |
| State what the issues are and give evidence | Tell them what the problem is using your knowledge of the situation  ● Give specific examples and refer to dates, documents, work or specific interactions  ● Explain the impact the problem is having |
| Ask for an explanation | ● Check for any additional information  ● Listen to what they have to say – they may need to let off steam  ● Keep an open mind and don’t jump to conclusions  ● Acknowledge their position and any mitigating circumstances  ● Introduce your questions and explore the issues together  ● Stay clear of emotive language |
| Agree a way forward | ● Ask the other party for proposals to resolve the situation  ● Discuss the options  ● MAKE A DECISION TOGETHER  ● Arrange a follow up meeting  ● Document the outline of the discussion and any agreement reached. And make sure both parties have a copy  ● Monitor and feedback on progress |