

Decision Case

To Add Cows or Not to Add Cows....That WAS the Question

1. Andy Sulco grew up on the dairy farm he inherited from his parents and now manages. The farm is located in rural New Hampshire and comprises some 94 acres, of which 53 are tillable. Andy milks 53 Holsteins, produces all of his hay and corn silage, and does most of the chores himself. He employs part-time labor, at least as long as they stay. Not able to pay high wages or offer full time work with benefits, turnover has plagued Andy's ability to keep good help.
2. Andy has a wife and son, both of whom are not especially supportive of Andy's farming venture. They share a common resentment that all of Andy's time and energy goes to the farm and little is left over to meet their needs. Additionally, the price of milk has dropped this past year, resulting in economic stress on the family. Andy's wife has an off-farm career and effectively is the financial supporter of the family. This too causes tension at home.
3. Andy is a rather private person, typical of most "Yankee" farmers. He rarely complains or talks about personal or emotional issues with anyone except his closest friends. As such he keeps most emotional issues bottled up inside. Recently this has resulted in some bouts with depression and the start of an ulcer.
4. One morning Andy left his house for the barn after a heated exchange with his wife. She was upset that Andy was not addressing any family issues, including their son's academic struggles. At the barn Andy ran into his local county Extension agent, Steve, who randomly stopped by with the Extension dairy specialist, Jim, as they were making farm visits in the area. The two could see that Andy was upset and inquired about what was wrong.
5. Andy chose not to go into the personal issues and instead spoke about the hard financial times his farm was going through as a result of low milk prices. Jim looked around as Andy was milking and saw that there was space in the barn to add stalls and cows. Soon Andy and Jim were crunching numbers (Exhibit A). They found that if Andy added 10 cows and did not hire any additional labor that his farm could gross another \$5,200 per year at these low milk prices, and more when prices rose.
6. After Steve and Jim left, Andy thought about the idea of adding cows, but he had an uneasy feeling in his gut. More cows meant more time in the barn which certainly would not help his family situation any, nor help him mentally or physically. Coincidentally, Steve too was uncomfortable with the idea and spoke with Jim about it in the car as they were leaving.
7. Steve expressed to Jim that before making recommendations about adding more cows or doing other things, that they should discuss the full situation in more depth with Andy. Jim was not sure what Steve was talking about so Steve elaborated. Steve mentioned that there was no discussion about Andy's life, whether he was happy, how his family was doing, what the impact might be on the environment if he added more cows, or other such considerations.
8. Jim felt that the questions about the family and other personal issues were not their business unless Andy offered these on his own. Likewise, Jim felt that 10 cows would not degrade the environment; after all they had calculated that Andy's manure storage system could handle the output of these cows and that Andy had enough land to apply the additional manure and any waste milk. Steve and Jim agreed to disagree and went on with their other farm visits.

9. A few days later Andy was speaking with a close friend Dale, who also farmed down the road. Dale was a diversified organic grower and didn't know a lot about cows or livestock. Yet he had worked with Steve on a process called Holistic Management. He suggested that Andy call Steve and ask about it. Dale explained that his family and farm workers went through the process and it helped get everyone on the same page and also added a lot of creative ideas about alternative enterprises they might add to help make the farm more profitable.
10. Andy called Steve that afternoon and hesitantly asked about this thing called Holistic Management. Andy was not up for some "crunchy granola", hand-holding process in which everyone had to share their feelings or the like. Steve explained to Andy how it worked in general and suggested that it may be just what Andy needed. Steve and Andy talked further and Steve expressed his hesitation about the recommendation Jim gave to simply add more cows. Yes, it would help make the farm more profitable, but at what cost? Was economic profitability truly the answer to all of Andy's problems, or was there more needed?
11. Steve and Andy had a short conversation about what profitability meant to Andy and what Andy wanted out of life. Steve challenged Andy to think about how his life might be if everything in his life remained the same with the exception that the farm made tons of cash. Would Andy be happy, healthy and content? If so, Steve suggested that Andy should simply add the cows, spend some more time milking and doing chores, and reap the additional profits.
12. Andy thought about his conversation with Steve over the next few days and concluded that money alone would not address all of his issues, certainly not in terms of his family situation, nor in terms of his own personal happiness and health. The ulcer was a reminder of that.
13. Reluctantly Andy called Steve and asked if he would help him do that Holistic Management thing. Steve told Andy he needed to approach his wife, son, and farm hand first and see if they were interested. Andy was able to get buy-in from all these folks in short order. His wife wanted to do anything that might improve their family life and their son went along hesitantly. The farm hand was not given a lot of choice, but didn't put up any resistance.
14. Steve came over the following week and facilitated the process. They defined their *whole under management* (Exhibit B) and drafted a *temporary holistic goal* (Exhibit C). Steve also taught the group how to use the testing guidelines (Exhibit D).
15. After four sessions, the group advanced enough to be able to brainstorm a list of suggestions to garner more farm income. Having a holistic goal and the ability to test potential options, Andy could filter these ideas using the testing guidelines to choose alternatives that would not only generate more income, but would also help him move closer towards the life he and his family desire.
16. Andy and his family found that by just going through the process they understood each other so much better. "It was helpful to have you referee," he said to Steve after one meeting. Yet, he greatly appreciated getting his say and having other folks understand where he was coming from, and also he had to admit, finally getting what his wife was talking about. After all he did love her and all.
- 17. What information in the Sulco Farm whole under management, Exhibit B, might prove helpful in determining a desired course of action?**
- 18. How would the Sulco Farm holistic goal, Exhibit C, prove useful in determining a desired course of action?**