

A Learning Experience— *The Davis Family Farm*

by Seth Wilner

Twenty one years ago Steve and Barbara Davis purchased 45 acres (18 ha) of land in Acworth, New Hampshire. This land had previously been a working farm 50 years ago. The Davises spent the first 10 years clearing the land and returning it to a condition that would support production agriculture.

Over time, the Davis Farm increased its capacity and soon began selling products at regional farmers' markets and offering on-farm internships. This expansion in biodynamically produced food coincided with a growing regional demand for locally produced organic foods, giving rise to the formation of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) on their farm.

As the CSA continued to grow over the years, Steve and Barbara Davis invited neighboring farmers to join with them in meeting the production needs of their growing customer base. At this time, the Davis Farm decided to change its name to the Cold Pond Community Farm (CPCF). This name more appropriately described the expansion that included neighboring farmers. In addition to the name change, the Davis family formed a land trust named Cold Pond Community Land Trust (CPCLT). CPCLT leases land to farmers producing for the Cold Pond Community Farm. These producers sell their food and products through the Cold Pond Community Farm CSA and through regional farmers' markets and local stores. The Davis Farm is one of the farms that produce food and products for the CSA; they also sell their products at local stores and farmers' markets.

Holistic Sap Boiling

I will never forget the first time I attempted to formally teach the Davises Holistic Management, as my experience was memorable from so many perspectives. I had arranged a date and time to meet with Steve and Barbara Davis and their family members and farm interns to begin the process of teaching and integrating Holistic Management into their current management. Typical of many farmers, all were a touch skeptical and quite busy, so we worked hard to fit in this educational session. I believe that had I not had a personal relationship with Steve and Barbara, this first session may not have taken place. Thus it was one of the first times I came to appreciate a lesson I have found to hold true in my career, *introducing new concepts and approaches to farm families is greatly enhanced through personal relationships and mutual trust.*

Our first meeting was scheduled for an early evening during February 2002. As it turned out, the sap had begun to flow, so the Davises had to boil. I had driven to their farm with a large flip chart, a pad of paper and some posters and illustrations I had made during one of my training sessions. When I arrived at the farm, I learned that the meeting was to be held in the sugar house, which involved a hike through snowy fields. The hike precluded the use of my teaching aides, and I was forced to simply be flexible and carry only those materials that fit into my shoulder bag. I arrived at the sugar house to find seven people conversing around a large wood-fired evaporator, drinking boiling sap

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to stay warm. It was actually a very elegant setting to engage in a discussion about values, desired quality of life, and decision making. I filled a mug with boiling sap, unloaded a note pad from my bag, took out some notes that I had prepared, and jumped in.

Familiar with Extension activities, the people in the room prepared themselves to listen and learn from a “knowledgeable expert.” I tried to dispel this paradigm by sharing honestly my novice level of Holistic Management. Nonetheless, they were still eager at the onset to listen and learn from me. And so it was, I launched into my opening, a description of the model, including what I thought was interesting background information on its derivation and the life and times of Allan Savory.

Fairly quickly I could sense that I was losing the interest of the group, after all, they had just come off a long day collecting sap, and it was approaching bed time for several in attendance. After about half an hour, Steve Davis saved me by asking what I believe most, if not all, in the room wanted to ask, “*Can we just get started with this and skip the explanation?*”

Once we began the process of developing a holistic goal, the evening proceeded quite nicely. We went around the room with each person sharing what they valued in life, how they wanted their life to be like on the Davis Farm, what they wanted in their life, and what energized and depleted them with respect to their interactions on the Davis Farm. A short time after the meeting Barbara Davis said to me that it was the first time she could recall hearing her children articulate their values and life desires, especially as they related to the farm.

I imagine that the sharing of values was equally as potent for the kids, for they were able to clearly hear their parents articulate their values, ethics, and life desires. Thus that evening I learned a second valuable lesson about Holistic Management, “*the process of forming a holistic goal is as important as the product that results.*” This lesson has shaped the way I teach and implement Holistic Management, as I truly see the process as equally valuable to the product itself.

A Flexible Approach

Time had passed before my work with the Davis Farm proceeded again. I had not succeeded in energizing the group to continue

their learning and I wanted to have more clarity before I worked with them again. Many in the group felt that once the quality of life component of the holistic goal was complete, so too was their work. When I did approach Steve to set up another session, he was pretty reluctant to schedule a time. Steve suggested that after the growing season we would revisit the idea of continuing our work with Holistic Management.

I was not sure whether to push for the continuation of our work with Holistic Management, or to simply respect Steve’s desire to forgo this until sometime after the season was over. My decision was guided by a line from a song I like, “*Don’t shake the tree if the fruit ain’t ripe.*” So I made a decision not to push Holistic Management. Here again was another lesson that has helped me immeasurably in my career as an educator; “*Meet people where they are at and respect that the slow process of behavior change will only occur when people are ready for it.*”

During the late fall of 2002, I approached Steve again to inquire about his interest in continuing our work with Holistic Management. He felt that Holistic Management might be very useful to the Board of Directors of a recently formed land trust, the Cold Pond Community Land Trust. Steve invited me to the January meeting to introduce Holistic Management and see if the members of the Board would be interested in learning and adopting this decision-making model. I took Steve up on his offer and agreed to attend the Board meeting in January 2003.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Through my involvement and work with the Cold Pond Community Land Trust and some of the land trust residents as well as other educational opportunities, I had several opportunities to continue discussing Holistic Management with the Davises in a variety of contexts. But it wasn’t until the Davises were faced with a challenging decision, that they were interested in learning how to put their holistic goal “to the test.”

What intrigued them about Holistic Management this time was that it could not only help them come to a decision that simultaneously considered potential impacts to their quality of life, their income and their farm

environment, but also through monitoring their decision, they could mitigate the situation in short order if necessary. This created a freedom to run with the decision and see if it bore the fruit they felt it would. I believe that through this two-year process of learning and experimenting Steve and Barbara Davis have come to gain a solid understanding of both the principles and process of Holistic Management, including the value of testing decisions and then monitoring these for the first sign that the decision may be resulting in undesirable outcomes.

Their decision was: *“Should we discontinue having volunteers and interns working on our farm?”*

Cause and Effect—This decision would address the root cause of the problem because the problem is the amount of time it takes to assist, organize, instruct and provide resources for the volunteers and interns, especially some who have high expectations of what will be provided and how.

Weak Link

Social—There would be no red flags if the Davises simply did not advertise for interns or accept them if they inquired.

Biological—Not applicable

Financial—Marketing conversion was identified as the weakest link. Having interns could help strengthen this link as they could attend farmers markets and help deliver goods to local stores. Yet, mostly, the interns deal in the product conversion link, so this will not probably affect the marketing/cash conversion aspect of the farm.

Marginal Reaction—Right now, not having interns would allow the Davises to have more time together which was a high priority in their holistic goal. It would save them time and not impact them monetarily. Although supporting community and furthering sustainable agriculture were important in the holistic goal, time together was more important at this point. So not having interns would take them closer to their holistic goal.

Gross Profit Analysis—Not applicable.

Energy/Money Source & Use—Not applicable

Sustainability—They did not see this decision negatively affecting the future resource base.

Society and Culture—After lengthy discussion, it felt right to both have and not have interns. There were positive sides to both actions, yet it felt the best to not have year-round interns. They identified the possibility of having non-year-round interns and have them only during

busy times of the year and not more than one at a time.

We tested the decision above while sitting around the kitchen table. Steve and Barbara identified the new possibility of having a part time intern. This decision would allow them to have more time together, it would allow them to have more time devoted to participating in the lives of the land trust residents, and it would also allow for Steve and Barbara to participate in local politics or pursue hobbies. We then tested this second option, and it came up a winner.



Steve and Barbara Davis are an important piece of Seth Wilner's learning community and demonstrate how on-farm education and research is a two way street in Cooperative Extension.

Following the testing questions we had a long discussion about monitoring the decision to look for the first signs that the decision was not working out as planned. The monitoring aspect of the model was helpful in that it took the burden off of Steve and Barbara to be “right.” Instead they could try the action and see how it worked for the next year. If the monitoring showed signs that the action was not resulting in unintended negative consequences, they could then evaluate the situation at the end of this year to see if they wanted to continue.

Decisions Don't Just Happen

Steve and Barbara, as well as their family and farm interns, are a very progressive group of people. They are sound stewards of the land, care strongly about the community they live in, and are devoted to the success of their farm and family life. As such Holistic Management bore fruit for them.

In separate one-on-one interviews with Steve

and Barbara, I asked them to describe the impacts that resulted from our work together with Holistic Management. Steve said, “I used to think that decisions just happened. You thought about things and then decided what you thought was best. You knew how it turned out sooner or later and went from there. But as I learned about the process (of Holistic Management), I saw how to make decisions differently, in a way that considered what I wanted much better.” Steve felt that Holistic Management improved his ability to make decisions. He feels that he has less stress as a result of this process and that he is more confident in the outcomes. The process also improved his communication with his family and others.

Barbara cited great benefits with including the kids as decision makers in the family. She said that the times they have included the kids in the conversations has been very beneficial for the family and has improved the kids' self confidence. “They felt that their input was as important as ours, and this increased their confidence and self-worth,” says Barbara. They also added many creative ideas to the discussions. Barbara said that it helped her to be clearer in her own mind when she makes decisions, thus increasing her confidence in her decision making.

They also both monitor their decisions more than they used, and they keep their holistic goal in their mind as they walk through life, trying to make decisions that move them toward their holistic goal. Steve and Barbara also keep re-visiting their holistic goal and changing it, and each time this process helps their relationship to grow.

The early challenge of how to engage the Davises has helped me to become a far more effective educator in numerous ways. It taught me to find other teaching approaches, and also taught me to accept and honor people where they are. Likewise it helped me to see that even just using some of the Holistic Management practices and processes offers great benefit. Indeed I am grateful to Steve and Barbara for helping me learn so much more about Holistic Management through my interactions with them; I am grateful and appreciative for the friendship that developed through our time spent *co-learning* Holistic Management.

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