

## 4. SELF-IDENTITY

### "I AM A FARMER"

*"... the pushback has always been, don't think we could do that here? Because this is the family farm, it's been in the family for seven generations or something and I couldn't share that with anyone.... I remember visiting a guy... and I said, "well, do you want to farm?" And he said "... actually, I've been chosen and I can't be the person who loses the farm."*

Nicola Shadbolt

Self-identity is about how you define yourself, how you see yourself, typified in the statement "I am a farmer" as opposed to "I am not a farmer" or "I am no longer a farmer." Perceptions of self-identity influence the business of farming and the people who farm. Does a farmer, for example, perceive themselves as a profit maximiser, a minimal profit lifestyle, a land custodian, a conservationist or something else? Self-identity, in particular a sense of a loss of self-identity impacts our thinking and/or behaviours. For example, during family/management succession processes a variance amongst individuals within a business in how they perceive their personal self-identity can give rise to confusion and even conflict. In that scenario, how would the different members of the business or different members of the farming family answer the questions "Who am I? Who are we? What is important to me? What am I going to do if I am not, or am not going to be "the farmer"? <sup>53</sup>

The partnership or family business bearing the name of an individual or group of individuals can mean that the values and aspirations of the individuals are then often subsumed into the values and aspirations of the business. This can take some unpicking in order to determine personal and collective goals, objectives and values. So, what are the personal values and aspirations of the individuals strategically and operationally involved in the farming business? Do they align or differ? How often are they discussed? How does this affect the positioning of the business? If an individual stops being the active farmer, what do they then become? Is being a retired farmer a self-identity? One discussant among others highlighted that a farmer in their sixties only just taking control because they've been working for their mother or father for the last 20, 30, 40 years needed to be addressed, because it just did not happen in other sectors.

A further discussion gave rise to a list of questions that are often asked by individuals leading family businesses faced with, resisting, or even fearful of succession and of change:

- What will be my legacy/happen to my legacy?
- What am I going to do if I am not 'the farmer'?
- Am I asking too much of the next generation?
- Can I trust the next generation?
- What are my values and aspirations and the mission I have signed up to?
- Will it change with the next generation, or a new generation?

The reflection in our conversation was that succession in both ownership and management is a process not a single event. Ownership transfer, succession management and the resultant change in self-identity is difficult to navigate. “*I am a farmer*” resonates with a sense of being, a sense of belonging that goes far beyond a job description. Anything that is perceived to threaten self-identity is often met with distrust or dismay. The statement “*change is inevitable: growth is optional*” is attributed to John C Maxwell. The UK agricultural sector currently sits in a place where change is inevitable. Changing who we see ourselves as being, changing our sense of purpose and our sense of belonging, our rootedness takes time. Becoming through reimagining our self-identity takes time. However, time is not on the side of the UK agricultural sector. Change, whether it is climate-driven, technology-driven, politically or socially-driven is inevitable. Being ‘mission-led’ reflects that change is inevitable and this will impact on our self-identity. We need to navigate this for ourselves and for those around us. Being mission-led requires an individual, business or sector to continually embrace change and recognise that to grow and being opportunity-driven are essential if the goal is to thrive and not simply to survive.

### Self-identity summary

- Who am I? Who are we? What is my legacy? What are our values and aspirations, as individuals and collectively [our mission]?
- Self-identity roots us to who we are. “*I am a farmer*” resonates with a sense of being, a sense of belonging that goes far beyond a job description. Change requires us sometimes to become something different and this can make us question our self-identity.
- Change is a process not a singular event. Changing who we see ourselves as being, changing our sense of purpose and our sense of belonging, navigating our becoming, rebalancing our rootedness can take time, but time the sector does not have.

The next section considers these aspects of determining strategic intent and mission for agricultural businesses.

