Trygve Skolness longs for the days of farming with extended family. Ever since joining the family’s wheat, barley, bluegrass and sugar-beet operation in 1974, farming had always been a family affair for the Glyndon, Minn., farmer, who now partners 50-50 in the operation with his wife, DeeAnn.

“When I came back, there were seven of us including my father and uncle,” recalls Trygve (pronounced “trig-vee”). “Now I’m the only one left from either death or leaving.”

When his uncle died in 1994, the farm transitioned to a partnership between Skolness and another cousin on the board of the incorporated business. Skolness focused on farm operations, while his cousin managed farm finances. Things began to turn sour. “My partner told me he didn’t think he wanted to farm anymore,” he recalls.

With no exit strategy in place, what followed were 10 years of disagreements ranging from management of funds to work assignments. By 2001, with the partnership badly damaged and the partners at loggerheads, they found help through their ag lender, who mediated a painful, expensive split by dividing in half the 8,000-acre farm that had weathered storms through multiple generations.

Looking back, Skolness says the split was the best decision for both parties. But the havoc it wreaked on family relationships was permanent. “I miss those family relationships that went away when we split the farm up,” he says. “I miss them dearly, but they’re gone.”

Avoid a ‘business divorce’ with transparency, trust, communication and accountability

Trygve Skolness

Foundation of Trust

Stories like Skolness’ are all too common in farming partnerships where trust has been completely eroded, says Lance Woodbury, agricultural business adviser in Garden City, Kan. Without trust, no relationship, business or otherwise, can last.

“When people raise the ‘t’ word, it

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