

Special Supervisory Situations

The management skills discussed so far in this book - leadership, supervision, delegation and adapting to personality style - apply to all personnel but you may need to give special consideration to different situations. We discuss some special, but quite common, farm management situations.

Family Members

A farmer recently said to an extension agent, "I do not attend your labour management meetings since we operate a family farm." This sparked a lively discussion about what labour management is.

Labour management is sometimes thought to be the handling of hired employees. But this is too narrow a definition. The members of a farm family are human beings and there must be management of their labour inputs. Although family members may not be regarded as "employees" in the traditional sense of that word, their skills and capabilities should be a major consideration in the labour management process.

The combination of business and family that occurs in the family farm results in a complicated set of dynamics. Since it is seldom a simple matter of just hiring or firing when it comes to family members, it is critical to manage family labour situations carefully and effectively. There are no hard and fast rules to follow, but following many of the guidelines that are suggested for hired employees also benefits family members.

Some suggestions follow:

- Define hours to be worked, days off, sick leave, holidays etc. Clarifying what is expected helps all concerned.
- Pay fair wages for work done. Do performance reviews. Such practices can help overcome the tendency to let emotions and unreal expectations rule. Avoid playing favorites.

An example: Jill is a hard-working daughter of the Jones family. The Jones operate a purebred dairy farm. Jill sometimes feels cheated by her older brother, Jim, who is destined to manage the farm. Despite Jill's hard work and natural way with livestock, she is always aware Jim receives the praise.

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- Be clear on who is the boss. Studies show that employees want to know who is in charge. On some family farms it seems that everyone assumes that they are in charge. When several “bosses” are involved in giving directions to an employee or a group of employees, the results are almost always disastrous. Labour management principles tell us that it is important that the “real” boss be identified and that he or she be responsible.
 - Develop effective and open communication skills. Problems that arise need to be discussed, not ignored with the hope that they’ll go away.

The Small Farm

The workforce on many farms consists of the operator, some unpaid family members and a regular hired employee. Such a situation often breeds personnel management problems. Usually, the farm operator continues to work as hard as if there were no hired employee involved and remains a “do-er”. He or she has had little experience in managing employees. The major objective is often to make sure that the employee works as hard or harder than the operator and family members.

To avoid these problems, first make sure you have a job description for the employee. (See Book 2, *Hiring*, in this Handbook series.) Also have an agreement spelling out the hours of employment. If at all possible, the employee should be given responsibility for specific tasks. In allocating these tasks, do not give the employee all of the unpleasant ones; you should show leadership by taking on some of these less desirable tasks yourself.

Temporary or Seasonal Workers

Temporary employees often require close supervision. Worker productivity is directly related to the amount of personal contact and trust shown between the supervisor and worker. In training temporary employees, keep your approach fairly simple, though sufficient to do designated tasks efficiently and effectively. You will want to train them sufficiently to handle the task assigned. Over time, you may want to invest more training in those who show potential and interest in staying at this employment longer than originally planned.

For temporary employees, continually develop work plans and schedules and exercise close supervision. The directive or authoritative style of

Living and Working in the Same Yard

leadership may work best. These employees will tend to view this job as a means to an end: for example, to secure money to meet various personal needs or have some income until a permanent position can be found. Because of this, your pay structure is very important.

If temporary employees stay on longer than planned and gain skills, they may react better to other styles of leadership because they may become more familiar with and committed to the objectives of the business.

In many situations, hired employees are supplied housing as a part of their employment package and often the house is located in the same yard as the farm owner. This situation can give rise to several problems which need to be managed carefully.

a) Privacy

Hired employees and their families need and have a right to privacy. Lack of privacy can lead to tension and friction which otherwise may not occur. Consider some of the following methods to create some privacy for your employees.

- place the house some distance from your own (this could be a solution if a mobile home were supplied)
- plant hedges or build fences
- respect your employee's privacy.

b) Infringing on time-off

It can be very tempting to ask for assistance that "will only take a minute" when your employee is handy, even if he or she isn't on duty. Even though employees may be willing to help out, it's important not to take advantage of their good nature. Respect time-off. Don't force your employee to leave the farm in order to get any free time.

Acknowledge any extra emergency help in some tangible way i.e. bonus, extra pay, time off, etc. Don't just say thanks.

c) Repairs and maintenance

Make it very clear who is responsible for repairs and maintenance required in the employee's house. If you are responsible for replacing worn-out appliances (for example), then do it promptly and willingly. Expecting your employee's family to live with non-functioning essentials such as a stove or hot water heater is bound to create resentment.

d) Kids and dogs

There are no easy solutions to offer if problems arise relating to pets or children. It may be your dog that howls all night and keeps your employees awake or it may be the other way around. It may be friction between your children and theirs could arise. These are difficult situations to handle. Being aware of them and discussing them in advance may help.

e) Family safety

The safety of children in a farm situation is a matter for the mutual discussion and input of all concerned. Everyone should be aware of a clear cut policy relating to the safety of children on the farm and be equally responsible for maintaining the rules.

Dealing with Cultural Diversity

Working with people who look, believe or act differently from you may be difficult or uncomfortable. You may not know what to say or to expect. Certain people may not react when you speak to them or perform in the way you expect.

Understanding Other Cultures

Learning to understand and respect your employees of other cultures will go a long way toward making your association with them both comfortable and productive.

Many misunderstandings arise because people from different cultures interpret or react to certain situations very differently. Consider the following example.

Jack White managed a team of Asians who worked for his greenhouse operation. He had developed a plan to reduce the number of hours needed to do many of the greenhouse operations. He knew he needed the co-operation of the team members to make it work, so he called a meeting to discuss his idea. No one disagreed so the new plan was implemented.

Within the first few weeks, it was evident that the workers weren't doing what they had agreed to at the meeting. Jack felt angry that the team hadn't done what they agreed to do.

In many cultures, saying "no" to someone's request or offer, even if it seems unreasonable, is taboo. The person who does not agree usually sends other signals that indicate their disagreement. These may be too subtle to detect if you are not from that culture. In other cultures, "no" is never said to one in authority. Again, other signals may be used. The untrained outsider who misses these signals may feel that an agreement has taken place and be surprised when what "was promised" never happens. Silence doesn't necessarily mean agreement.

Try to learn as much as you can about the culture of employees you have: their values, norms and expectations. Realize that different cultures may have different ways of viewing time, of communicating and expressing emotion, or of handling conflicts.

Tips for Bridging a Language Barrier

When people are speaking different languages (or using unfamiliar jargon), it can easily cause misunderstanding and hard feelings. Here are some ways to bridge the language barrier.

- Learn some of the language of a culture you deal with regularly. Knowing how to say “Hello,” “Goodbye,” “Please,” “Thank you,” etc. helps to create respect and goodwill.
- Use an interpreter.
- Be patient with people who speak your language less fluently than you. Also, speak more slowly, use simple words and avoid slang. Do not raise your voice and speak louder as if the other person were hard of hearing.
- Listen carefully and check back with each other from time to time to ensure you’re each getting the message across.

Substance Abuse in Employees

Alcohol (and or drugs) and work on the farm constitute a dangerous mix. An employer who has an employee with a drinking or drug problem has a responsibility to deal with it.

What an Employer Should Do

1. Verify that alcohol or drugs are the cause of an employee’s impairment. Make sure that something else, such as sickness or stress, isn’t the cause.
2. Take steps to remove impaired employees from the work place, ensuring that they do not cause harm to themselves or to others by operating equipment or vehicles. Make a record of the event and have a witness, if possible.
3. Use judgement and discretion. It is often best to have the employee take the day off without pay and take disciplinary or other appropriate action at a later time.

An employer is in a good position to help an individual with a drinking problem. By doing nothing, an employer becomes an “enabler”, a person who allows the problem to persist by covering up and allowing the employee not to face the issue.

Guidelines for Dealing with a Substance Abuser

1. Outline what will happen if the employee continues to drink. Discuss the problem with the employee in a private meeting; write down the circumstances and your expectations as an employer. Let the employee know you would like to see his or her problem resolved.
2. Don't threaten unless you are prepared to follow through. To threaten and not follow through only reinforces to the substance abuser that there will not be any consequences for his or her behaviour.
3. Focus on the problem behaviour, not on the individual. Don't use violence, either physical or verbal, and avoid nagging or provoking.
4. Stick to the subject. One of the ways substance abusers avoid responsibility for their actions is to try to turn attention to other topics.
5. Know what professional help is available in your area and encourage your employee to seek it.