

Getting and Keeping Good Employees is like Building a Barn

Editor's Note: This article is Part 2 in a series of 4, focussing on having your family involved in your business. Judy Walters is the Promotion Coordinator of The Canada/British Columbia Farm Business Management Program.

Of all the challenges farmers face, finding, keeping, and motivating employees is one of the most frustrating ones.

People aren't like machines - they're complicated. You can't just fix or modify them. Figuring out what makes farm workers tick and how to get them to tick a little faster, steadier, or more independently can prove a whole lot harder than figuring out how to trade futures.

The key to finding and keeping good employees is no different than the key to marketing, says B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food farm management specialist Lorne Owen. Just as farmers have to figure out what consumers want and give it to them, they have to figure out what farm employees' needs are and meet them.

Figuring out what employees' needs are doesn't require a Ph.D. in psychology. A little introspection will suffice.

According to Owen, employees' needs can be boiled down to the "4 L's"— *live, love, learn and legacy*.

"Employees are no different than farmers," says Owen. "Both need enough income to live comfortably, a job and co-workers they can care about, an opportunity to learn and grow, and a chance to make a meaningful contribution."

The other thing employees need is leadership.

How happy a farmer is with the people he hires is, in large measure, a function of how clear he is in his thinking and communicating," says Owen, who organized a series of labour management workshops this Spring under the Canada-B.C. Farm Business Management Program, a joint federal-provincial initiative aimed at helping farmers improve their business management skills, competitiveness, self-reliance and long-term sustainability.

A farm manager needs to have a vision of what kind of an operation he wants to run, both now and in the future.

If, for example, you're hiring help, you need to figure out what your "labour needs" are, says Owen. Long before you start interviewing applicants, you should determine what skills, experience, qualifications and personality you want the people you hire to have.

Once you've hired someone, you have to train him or her. New employees may know how to milk cows, check feedlot pens, feed pigs or tend crops, but they won't know

anything about the intricacies and idiosyncracies of your operation. You have to tell employees exactly what you want them to do and how you want them to do it.

Once you have a competent, reliable employee, the challenge is to keep him or her. The secret, says Owen, is communication. It's fine to delegate responsibility and give instructions;

It's equally important to listen.

The directive style of management — telling workers what to do — is giving way to participative management — asking employees what they think should be done, who should do it, and how and when it should be done.

Encouraging employees to get involved in the business empowers and inspires them. They feel their ideas and their efforts are valued. Letting employees set their own production targets and work schedules gives them a greater sense of autonomy, and typically improves productivity and efficiency.

Giving employees responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the farm frees a farmer up to grow his business, Owen points out.

In addition to the 4 L's, *employees need feedback*. They need to know you notice and value the contribution they're making to your operation. Appreciation is the glue that ensures good employees stay, says Owen.

"Creating a workplace that meets employees' needs is like building a barn," says Owen. "Careful employee selection and proper, ongoing training are the foundation. The 4L's are the four walls. Communication and inspiring hands-off leadership are the roof." □

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