

## Discipline Helps You Keep Employees (Part 1)

EXAMPLE: Bob has worked for you for three years. He's always been reliable and conscientious, lately, though, he's been arriving late for work. First, it was only five or ten minutes; tuesday he didn't show up until 9:00 a.m. Last week, he missed a cow in heat. Yesterday he forgot to doctor a cow and this morning she's dead. You're angry and perplexed, you can't understand Bob's behaviour. You don't want to fire him, but you can't afford mistakes as costly as yesterday's, you decide to ask your neighbour George Chilton for advice.

"Disciplining employees is kind of scary," sympathizes Chilton. "A few years back, we had a guy who did the same thing. First he came late, then he started missing things, so I talked to him. I asked him what was going on, he told me he was having personal problems, but assured me they would be short-lived. They were, and he stayed with us another two years."

"But you were lucky," you protest.

"No. Luck doesn't have anything to do with it," says Chilton, "Last Fall we had a guy doing the same thing. So I talked to him. Turned out he was 'rodeoing' every weekend. I told him all our hands have to be reliable. He kept missing work and making mistakes. I gave him a couple of warnings, then I told him he had to make a choice. He found a different job."

"It really doesn't matter what the situation is, the approach to poor performance should always be the same," explains Chilton.

The secret to handling employee performance problems is 'progressive discipline'. Progressive discipline is a systematic approach to addressing and hopefully correcting wayward performance.

As in baseball, employees are given three warnings. The first is informal, the second formal, the third written. Few farm hands, however, strike out. Most employees are eager to do a good job. Usually, a gentle reminder is all that's needed.

The goal of progressive discipline is not to rebuke or employees who have gone astray. The goal is to correct the unacceptable behaviour.

Progressive discipline yields many benefits. A clear, known, systematic approach to poor performance prevents hard feelings, nasty arguments, ugly terminations and possible legal repercussions. It also prevents losing valuable employees.

"Progressive discipline," promises U.S. farm labour management guru Howard

Rosenberg, "means you never have to say you're fired."

For progressive discipline to work, there are three pre-requisites you must observe, say B.C. farmers who practice it.

"First," says John Schroeder, President of Valleybrook Farms Ltd., (an Abbotsford flower producer), "you must tell employees what you expect of them."

Dan Haan, manager of Omega Farms Ltd., a Fraser Valley hog operation with farms at Abbotsford and Chilliwack, spells it out very clearly. "I don't want to walk around with big stick and I hate firing people so I lay all the cards out on the table before I hire people."

"Second," says Schroeder, "you must tell employees what will happen if they don't measure up." Abbotsford poultry producer Jaedel Enterprises Ltd. has a Policy and Procedure Manual which spells out employees' responsibilities, and outlines step-by-step what the consequences will be if they don't do their job properly. Having a set procedure makes handling performance problems easier for both staff and supervisors, says Jaedel's director of operations, Richard Friesen. Managers don't have to put up with a lot of nonsense. All they need to do is follow procedures. For employees, a set policy provides assurances that they will be treated "fairly, equally and consistently."

Expectations should be spelled out with a written job description in clear, ongoing verbal instructions. Haan, who oversees 15 employees, most of whom are immigrants, spends a lot of time explaining what he wants done and why it's important.

"With the growing threat of legislation and legal actions being launched by disgruntled ex-employees, spelling consequences out clearly and applying rules consistently are essential," says Friesen.

The third rule is, "don't procrastinate."

"It's important that you handle problems right away," says Haan. "Generally, the longer a problem is left, the worse it gets. If an employee doesn't know he's doing something wrong or that you find a behaviour unacceptable, he'll keep doing the same thing. Not confronting problems promptly isn't fair to other employees, especially if their safety is at risk," adds Schroeder. Procrastination can ravage morale. It also sends the wrong message to employees. It tells them management doesn't care. It also usually ends up costing you money.

Assuming you've fulfilled the three pre-requisites, what should you do when an employee doesn't measure up? Haan likes to "give employees every opportunity possible to pull up their socks." He starts with a friendly little chat. Sounds simple, but there are more and less effective ways to broach a topic as sensitive as unsatisfactory job performance.

First, set the stage. Make sure it's private, but casual. Tell the employee what you're concerned about. Be specific, but be calm, diplomatic and non-accusatory. "I may be gruff, but I don't yell, scream or swear," says Haan.

Don't use "trigger phrases" such as "you always" or "you never." Don't chastise or belittle an employee by saying "you goofed" or "you don't understand." Don't push your weight around by saying "I demand."

Use "I statements" instead of "you statements" to help prevent the employee from becoming defensive. Instead of saying "you're not feeding the cattle properly" say "I'm concerned the cattle aren't gaining weight. You want to open the lines of communication so you can solve the problem. To do that, you must first determine the real cause of the problem, says Friesen. Problems can originate in one of two places — the workplace or the worker.

"We like to look at ourselves first," says Friesen. Sometimes employees need more training, instruction, time or equipment.

"Ruling out the workplace doesn't necessarily mean an employee has a problem with work," cautions Friesen. More than half the time, employees' problems "do not relate to work at all." They stem from personal, family or financial problems. Haan recommends coming right out and asking employees if they're having personal problems and if they are, trying to help by changing their responsibilities, schedule or giving them an advance.

Regardless of the cause, the next step is to ask the employee what he thinks can be done to solve the problem. Soliciting employees' input enables them to take ownership of the problem without embarrassment. It shifts the focus from the past to the future and from the problem to the solution. It acknowledges employees' intelligence and ability to solve their problems. It empowers staff and gives them an opportunity to chart their own future. Lastly, it defuses employee-employer tension.

**Part 2 of this article will appear in the September issue of the FAN.**