

Is Your Farm a Good Place to Work?

Recognizing the "two M's" of employee needs can make the difference.

by Lorne Owen
Original artwork by Jeff Maltby

Good help is hard to find. Most farmers know that. But the odd one manages to find and keep good employees. All the time. What's his secret?

His farm doesn't look any different than his neighbours' from the outside. Mmm, must be something on the inside.

It's attitude.

If you're a farm manager, it's wise to put yourself in your employees' shoes once and a while. Imagine what motivates them. Imagine how they feel.

First and foremost, people work to earn a living. But that's not why they stay at a job. Fewer than half the employees who leave a job do so for better wages and benefits. Usually they leave for personal reasons.

In an "ideal" job, a paycheque is often secondary. Being involved in the company, making it work, helping it prosper are primary.

In certain respects, farm employees are no different than corporate executives or line workers. They need to feel important. They need to feel like they're an important part of the operation. They need to be challenged. They like to learn. They need to feel like they're making a valuable contribution to the success of the operation.

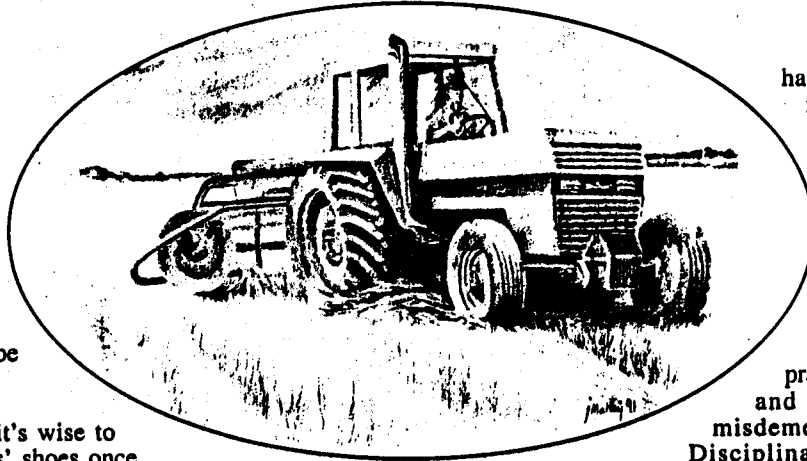
Managers who recognize and fulfill their employees social and emotional needs will have little trouble keeping good employees on the job. They're farm will soon acquire a reputation for being a "great place to work". Astute managers can boost productivity, reduce labour turnover, and improve morale. They can also enjoy the peace of mind that comes from knowing they have steady, reliable help.

The needs of employees fall into two main categories: maintenance and motivation. The "two M's" of good labour relations. The maintenance "givens" of any job, on or off the farm, include:

- fair wages
- fair treatment
- job security
- opportunities to socialize

What are some of the maintenance factors an employer should consider incorporating them into a job?

A clear, brief description of the job when it is advertised is a good place to start. That way, it's understood right from the start what the employee is expected to do. A job description should outline the salary range, responsibilities (not specific duties) and qualifications necessary for the job. Once an



employee has been hired, an employment contract or agreement which spells out the terms of employment, the dates of employment if not ongoing, the salary, provisions for housing, time off, sick leave, insurance plans and so on can be drafted and signed by both the employee and employer.

For larger farms, an employee handbook can be used to cover other items not included in the contract agreement. A simple one-page document outlining such details as how to

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handle product, who employees are to report to, what constitutes suitable clothing and how long the lunch breaks are helps remind employees what's expected of them.

An employee handbook is a good place to spell out the "do's" and "don'ts" of your farm. It's important to tell employees precisely what's allowed and what's not on your farm. It's important that employees

have a clear understanding of the rules & whether it's alright to use a farm vehicle for personal business, make a trip into town when there's a lull in activity or what will happen if they're consistently late for work.

Disciplinary measures, if required, should be delivered in a consistent manner. It's poor practice to discipline one employee and then overlook a comparable misdemeanour committed by another. Disciplinary measures should also be delivered at an appropriate time and place f in other words, in private, clearly, and succinctly. Giving an employee a piece of your mind in front of his or her co-workers does nothing to foster good relations on the farm. After you've explained what was wrong, leave it be. Don't belabour the error. Don't forget to hand out compliments, too.

When new employees come on staff, it's advisable to run them through a quick orientation program. Taking time to tell employees something about the farm, its activities, other employees and the farm's business goals will help a newcomer feel more comfortable. It will also help get them on side quicker. Employees should be introduced to everyone they'll be working with and made to feel like they're an integral part of the farm and, wherever possible, the community.

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Orientation can consist of a brief history of the farm and an overview of its various enterprises. It's a good idea to include a map of the farm in the employee handbook, especially if it is broken into several different parcels. There's been more than one new employee who inadvertently cultivated a neighbour's field or loaded up his cattle.

A realistic, well-planned work load is another important maintenance factor. If you have hectic and quiet periods in your business, perhaps your employees could trade off extra work during peak periods for time off during a slow spell.

Employers should try as best they can to match their management style to an employee's characteristics and experience. An employee who is inexperienced or unsure of himself or herself may need considerable guidance, while a more seasoned worker can be given more responsibility.

Fair wages and benefits are essential and need to correspond to employees' experience, qualifications, productivity and responsibilities, as well as the job being



done. Give some thought to setting up a retirement plan or a vacation savings plan for your employees. A vehicle or property purchase plan is another incentive. Just about every employee can use a little help with money management.

Training, including safety training courses, is important too, especially since many farm employees don't come from a farm background. First aid courses, equipment handling courses and pesticide applicators' courses, for example, all add to an employee's self-esteem and competence on the job. In many ways, they're an investment in the future prosperity of the farm operation.

Jobs can be made more pleasant in a variety of ways. Mechanizing certain tasks is one alternative. Cleaning a dairy barn with a Bobcat is a darn sight more pleasant than using a shovel. Rotating jobs helps relieve monotony. Allowing employees to work in teams may increase in productivity.

In the maintenance category, there is a handful of fairly common sore points. Housing is typically a touchy subject. Housing should be of good quality. If you wouldn't want to live in the house you're providing for your employees, neither should

they. Housing facilities can be modest, but they should be clean, comfortable and in good condition. There should be a clear understanding of expectations on both parties' account. Unless otherwise agreed, it's the employers responsibility to maintain the building and make sure repairs are done when they're needed. Hot water tanks that don't heat or drains that don't drain can become major irritations if they're neglected.

Privacy is another concern, particularly when two or more families are living on the same yard. Moving a trailer to a different part of the farm or providing something as

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simple as a fence or a hedge can make for much more comfortable relations.

Another sore spot can be little jobs that keep coming up. Often they arise unexpectedly. Generally an employee won't mind pitching in in a pinch. If, however, an employee is constantly asked to do "just one more little thing" before quitting time, his or her patience may wear thin. Employers must also respect that their employees have personal lives and need time to tend to their affairs. Employees' time off or days off must not be violated, unless essential.

The importance of providing clear instructions cannot be underemphasized. Take the case of the employee who was asked to clean out a corral but who wasn't told it was necessary to leave a raised area in the centre for drainage. Many hours of work and a rainstorm later the corral was clean alright, but the farmer had a small lake to deal with.

Just as too many cooks spoil the broth, too many bosses confuse employees. Suppose the son has returned home from a job in the city or the farm is in transition from one generation to the next. If there's no clear division of responsibility, the employee may end up getting two different sets of instructions from two different people. One way around this situation is to hold regular family farm meetings to make sure everyone is on the same wave length.

Fair wages, fair treatment, job security and opportunities to socialize are the prerequisites. They set the stage. They provide an environment that gives employees the freedom, confidence and, hopefully, desire to take a real interest in their job and excel. ^{BC}Ag

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