

Managing Your Farm Labour

Finding and keeping hired help requires good management skills.

by Lorne Owen, M.Ag., P.Ag.

When Bob and Jean started farming, 18 years ago, their business was small enough that they could handle all the work themselves. Over the years, the business has grown and now there are four full-time employees on the farm.

Responsibility for the employees — the farm's labour relations — has fallen to Bob. Bob doesn't consider himself a strong "people person," but he's learned a few things about working with people over the years. And he knows the farm couldn't have expanded the way it did without his employees' help.

"Without good people I wouldn't be farming the way I want to," he says. "Having people I can rely on saves me a lot of worries and lets me take care of the other jobs I have to do."

Listening and talking is an important part of my job," says Bob. "Communication keeps us charged up and keeps everything running smoothly and that makes all the difference."

"It boils down to the difference between treating a sick cow or removing a dead one, five minutes filling a low tire in the yard or an hour fixing a flat in the field, replacing a \$30 bearing or replacing a \$300 spindle," he says.

Finding and keeping good employees on a farm isn't easy and it takes more than fair wages. It takes good labour relations which requires skillful recruiting

and interviewing, work scheduling and supervising, evaluating and motivating, training and discipline.

Bob's attitudes toward working with people comments have a lot to do with his success. He values working with good employees, farming, and having a job done well. He listens to his employees, explains his plans, has a positive attitude and makes supportive comments, all of which create good labour relations.

The benefits of good labour relations can not be underestimated. Poor labour relations have high costs. They can be a source of accidents and injuries, costly repairs, lost time, high employee turnover, lower yields, arguments over money and time off, legal tangles, lost sleep and the other problems that coffee shop lore and fence post conversations are built on. While these stories may be dressed up with each telling they are usually based on actual misadventures — misadventures that can be avoided.

Given the increase in non-family salaried and wage employees on Canadian farms, labour management is a skill farm managers can't afford to be without. Statistics Canada data shows that non-family employed labour now accounts for 30 percent of the agriculture work force. Future expansion will depend on good labour management skills. Good labour management skills fall into four categories.

Leadership

Leadership is considered the foundation of good labour relations. Farmers don't usually think of themselves as leaders, but as managers they do play a leadership role.

A study of successful business managers found that effective leadership is based on: clearly defined goals, communicating and listening, credibility and experience, as well as honesty and sincerity resulting in trust.

In their book entitled *The Leadership Challenge*, J.M. Kouzes and B.Z. Posner say that essential leadership activities include: searching for new opportunities and new ways of doing activities — experimenting and taking risks, sharing goals with others, communicating and enlisting their support, strengthening others and fostering a spirit of collaboration, setting an example and planning small wins, recognizing contributions and celebrating accomplishments.

People Skills

Understanding personalities is also an important management skill because personality directly affects working relationships.

Better results can be realized when both managers and employees are aware of how others' reactions may differ, given their personalities.

Here are some examples:

- A "bottom line" person often finds it frustrating to work with someone who spends a lot of time explaining details and alternatives before giving instructions. Conversely, someone who likes details can find it difficult to work with a person who sums everything up in a single sentence.

- Individuals who like to consider a number of alternatives before acting may find it annoying to work with someone who just starts a job as quickly as possible, and then figures things out as they go. On the other hand, an individual who likes to start right in on a job may find spending a lot of planning very trying.

- Outgoing people need to be with other people. Being in a crowd energizes them, and they like to formulate ideas by talking and "thinking out loud." Individuals who are less extroverted find time alone gives them energy. Being in a

crowd is enjoyable, but draining. They often prefer to formulate ideas and consider alternatives privately before speaking out.

Managers who can tune into personality differences and modify their approach will get better results from their staff.

Tests such as the Briggs-Meyer Personality Evaluation (sometimes used in 4-H workshops) or the C.R.G.I. Personality Style Indicator (used in the ARDCORP Labour Management workshops) are helpful in developing these skills.

Another important management skill is listening. Most people are much better at talking than they are at listening. Making time to listen patiently contributes to team-building and keeps things running more smoothly. Effective listening is a skill and, like any other skill, can be developed with practice.

Labour Goals

While attitude, communication and people skills are essential to successful labour relations, written goals can provide important overriding guidelines. If goals are articulated, written down and shared with staff it is much easier for a manager to develop plans, communicate them to others and get the job done.

Labour goals may include improved production efficiency, delegating certain responsibilities and activities, careful equipment and livestock handling, safe working practices, or low staff turnover. Goals will vary greatly from farm to farm

and may be different for different workers. Once goals are written down they can then be translated into detailed day-to-day activities.

When setting labour goals it is wise to think about how you will measure results and when you expect to see results.

Management Style

Another important question is management style. Which is better: an autocratic, direct style best or a participatory, non-directive approach?

Research indicates there is no single "right" style. The best results are realized when a manager's approach is matched to the individuals they are working with, the task to be completed, and the specific circumstances around the task.

A manager's style should take into account the ability and experience of the person doing the task, the nature of the task, the individual's willingness to do the task, and the time available.

According to K. Blanchard and D. Zigarmi, authors of Leadership and the One Minute Manager, styles fall into four main categories: **telling, selling, participating and delegating.**

Telling or directing employees is suited to situations involving new tasks, new or inexperienced employees, employees who are reluctant to take on a job, or when a task is highly result-oriented. Telling also connotes a degree of urgency. Telling requires specific instructions and close supervision. A

great deal of encouragement and reinforcement is helpful.

A **selling** or coaching management style is appropriate as employees gain experience, competence and a better understanding of the job. Selling involves explaining decisions and providing opportunities for clarification. At this point, employees are still relying on a manager for direction as well as a great deal of positive reinforcement and encouragement.

A **participatory** management style is appropriate when an employee is familiar with the task and has a high level of competence. With this approach there is still a lot of direct contact between an employee and a manager in order to share ideas and facilitate decision making.

A **delegating** management style can be used when an employee has the ability and interest to take full responsibility for making and implementing decisions. The manager's role is to help to set goals, evaluate results and recognize meaningful accomplishments.

Incorporating some or all of these few basic concepts into your labour relations management can make a huge difference to your operation, your employees and your bottom line. ■

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