

Help your employees work harder and smarter

Maybe that unproductive worker isn't lazy — he or she just doesn't know exactly what you want done. Here's how to get things back on track and keep them there

To employee and employer alike, the words "performance evaluation" tend to raise visions of an interrogation complete with bright lights and a commandant demanding answers.

But performance appraisals shouldn't cause anxiety. Workers and their supervisors constantly evaluate each other. A warm approving smile, an angry scowl, a pat on the back, an exasperated sigh... they're all performance evaluations. A job review is just a more structured version of the same thing, says B.C. ag. ministry farm management specialist Lorne Owen.

Whether you have one employee or 20, time invested in performance appraisals is time well spent — if you treat the exercise not as a distasteful chore, but as an opportunity to motivate your staff.

Motivation is a money-maker. Motivated employees work harder and smarter because they want to. Sure, employees appreciate a raise, says Owen, but they won't respond by increasing productivity. In contrast, evaluations cost little and typically improve productivity by 20% or more.

People need to know how they're doing, explains Owen. Good performance reviews charge employees up. They come out knowing where they stand, that they're appreciated, and where they have to improve. They have goals to strive for.

Start your evaluation procedure by establishing performance expectations, suggests Robert Erwin, production manager at Gipaanda Greenhouses Ltd., a hothouse tomato operation employing 12 to 20 workers near Surrey, B.C. Set up concise job descriptions with specific performance objectives. Then decide what you're going to evaluate.

Select appropriate criteria, says Erwin. Don't measure a laborer's performance with the same yardstick you use to assess the work of a technical

specialist. Different positions demand different evaluation criteria.

Look for performance activities you can measure. "You need some way of putting numbers on employee achievement of objectives laid out in a job description," says Erwin. His employees are evaluated on speed and quality of their work.

Write down the criteria you're evaluating — it'll help keep you thorough and consistent. The list can cover anything from attendance and punctuality to how well employees do a job, initiative shown, and the ability to get along with co-workers.

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John Schroeder, president of Valleybrook Gardens Ltd., evaluates the 15 full-time and 60 seasonal employees working at his Abbotsford flower operation. This is based on their knowledge and understanding of specific duties they were hired to do, work quality, productivity, initiative, judgment, interpersonal relations with co-workers and supervisors, and attendance.

To get maximum benefit out of a performance appraisal, focus on the positive and the future, suggests Schroeder. He summarizes employees' principal strengths and suggests skills that need improving. Then he lays out specific plans for achieving needed upgrading. These can include on-the-job training and practice, and technical or personal improvement courses. He also recommends making formal performance evaluation a regular (say, yearly) and predictable event.

Robert Erwin agrees, but stresses

the need for continuous informal evaluation. Regular feedback reminds employees of your expectations, he explains, and tells them whether they're on the right track.

Frequent feedback is also a way to keep employees charged up, says Owen, especially if you make a point of "catching employees doing something right."

John Sommer, president of Fairfield Propagators Ltd., gives the 29 employees at his Chilliwack, B.C., cut flower business daily feedback — literally. Each day, he records how many bunches were cut and how long the work took. These numbers are posted on a large production chart in the lunch room. Staff see how they're doing, and productivity has shown a "big improvement" since the chart went up.

If employees get frequent feedback, an actual job review "shouldn't produce any surprises," says Erwin. As the name suggests, it's just a review and evaluation of what happened in the past, and an opportunity to chart a course for the future.

At Valleybrook, employees fill out a one-page self-evaluation before interviews. They summarize their understanding of their job, list their most significant achievements since the last review, and note what they hope to achieve in the next time period. They're asked how satisfied they are with their current job and, if not satisfied, what changes they would like.

Getting employees to take an active role in the evaluation process helps defuse anxiety. They come away with the feeling that they and their ideas matter; that they're not working in a vacuum. And as an employer, you get to hear their concerns — along with suggestions for improving your business.

Candid discussion tells workers what's valued and what they should strive to change or achieve. Most people want to excel, notes Owen, who

Hit videos use humor to assist employers

"Instead of somebody in a suit and tie explaining how to manage office employees, they feature people and situations anyone can relate to," says Tom Maloney, a farm management specialist at New York's Cornell University. "They get the point across in a humorous way," says University of Alberta rural economist Len Bauer. "They give students insight into the not-so-straight-forward issues associated with labor management," says Bill Boggess, who teaches farm management at the University of Florida.

"They" are 4 videos on personnel management. The series is a "raving success" both in Canada and the U.S., says B.C. ag. ministry farm management specialist Lorne Owen, who collaborated with Ken McEwan of Ontario's Ridgetown ag. college, Wayne Howard of the University of Guelph, and B.C. Ag. Employment Services to produce the videos for the Canadian Farm Business Management Council.

"People management is a big concern for farmers," says Owen. "Funding and co-ordination provided by the council enabled us to produce a world-class set of videos."

"Human resource management is the next frontier," says Matsqui, B.C., dairy farmer John Van Dongen. He says that's where financial management was 5 or 10 years ago — farmers knew they had problems, but weren't willing to admit it or talk about them.

"A lot of farmers just accept labor problems as normal," he adds. But if they don't talk about their problems, they never learn that there are better ways of handling both employees and family members who work on the farm.

It's a very personal subject, though. "Nobody likes being told they're a bad human resource manager," says Stittsville, Ont., Agriculture Employment Services office manager Greg Foster.

That's why the videos are a great ice-breaker, says Van Dongen, who

provided advice on content. "They are non-threatening, light-hearted, and informative without being preachy or academic. They make you laugh — and think at the same time, because you see yourself."

"It's crucial that you learn how to handle people efficiently and effectively," says Ridgetown's Ken McEwan. People are like any other farm input. Learning how to manage them is as important as learning how to seed crops, feed livestock, or maintain machinery.

Labor accounts for a substantial proportion of production costs on many farms. Managing people is integral to "cutting costs and enhancing productivity," he says.

The videos, each about 20 minutes long, available in French or English, VHS format, include:

- *Hiring the Right Person for Your Farm* explains why it's important to know yourself and your labor needs before interviewing job applicants.

- *Managing People on Your Farm* shows why you should outline your expectations in detail and train staff thoroughly.

- *How to Supervise Employees* shows how clear communication and considerate treatment inspires staff to do their best.

- *How to Discipline Employees* outlines the prerequisites and 3 stages of a fair, effective progressive discipline policy.

Numerous sets are already available from farm management specialists and Canadian Farm Business Council reps. across the country. Provincial ag. offices should be able to help you out.

To buy your own, contact Lorne Owen, Abbotsford Agricultural Center, 1757 Angus Campbell Rd., Abbotsford, B.C. V3G 2M3 (phone 604-556-3091). Cost (including postage and handling) is \$20 for one video, \$30 for any 2, and \$60 for all 4. Make cheques payable to B.C. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food.

organized a series of labor/management workshops for farm managers last winter under the Canada/B.C. Farm Business Management Program, a jointly-funded initiative aimed at helping farmers improve their business skills.

Properly done, concludes Robert

Erwin, evaluation improves morale which in turn improves productivity. That's the key, he says.

"Some employers see performance appraisal as the first step in getting rid of unproductive employees. But with a good evaluation system, you won't have poor performers to get rid of." ☐



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