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Rules to Manage Employees

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Improve both worker and bottom-line performance

Nothing is easy about managing employees, which becomes exceedingly important the larger your operation becomes. Improving how you manage your work force not only improves employee productivity, but also that of your farm. This can make your farm a desired worker destination so the best and brightest naturally gravitate toward you.

The best rules for managing your work force, based on interviews with farm employee management consultants, are these:

GIVE WORKERS RESPONSIBILITY, NOT JUST TASKS.

"Many operations have grown to the point that to continue to grow and stay world class, they need people to take on more responsibility," says Bob Milligan, a farm management consultant based in Minnesota and professor emeritus of ag economics at Cornell University. This requires a systems approach in which the farm's vision and mission are communicated.

ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION.

It's important to have regular weekly or monthly employee meetings, at which time feedback and expectations are provided in a specific way. Provide regular feedback, but go beyond either criticism or accolades, Milligan says.

If a goal is not met, reasons why need to be taken into account, so that the only feedback categories are not just "positive" and "negative." A problem for many farm owners is that their expertise is often crop or livestock production. "Corn plants and cows don't need feedback," he says.

Too often, employees don't know what is expected of them, says Felix Soriano, president of APN Consulting, a Pennsylvania farm employee management consultant. Poor communication is often the cause of high turnover rates, which can be costly, he explains.

BECOME A GREAT PLACE TO WORK.

"You want to become the Microsoft of agriculture," Milligan says. "Microsoft is such a great place to work that it doesn't have to advertise." This means that supervisors must be very good at how they deal with employees. While there is no relevant data on agriculture per se, in the general economy more than two-thirds of people who voluntarily leave their job do so not because they don't like the job, but because they have issues with their supervisors.

GIVE JOBS MEANING.

For those who have entered the work force post-baby boom—members of Generation X (born from 1965 to 1980) and Generation Y or "millennials" (born from 1981 to 2000), the most important characteristic of a job is that it has meaning.

"There is a group of people unwilling to work at a job that doesn't have meaning for them," Milligan says.

This is important because while overall unemployment is high for the economy, agriculture still has a shortage of quality talent.

RECRUIT THE VERY BEST CANDIDATES AND INTERVIEW THEM PROPERLY.

"Recruitment is marketing," Milligan says. The goal is to recruit a pool of people you can select from for your final decision, not just fill a slot. Recruitment involves more than taking out ads in magazines and newspapers, although this is important, Soriano says.

Current employees, neighboring farms and colleges are other good sources for recruiting workers, he says.

The interview process needs to be very specific, with carefully thought out questions that are written down. Part of the interview should be about characteristics the potential employee is looking for in a supervisor.

CULTIVATE AND MOTIVATE.

One common problem is that employers don't spend enough time cultivating relationships with workers. "Developing a relationship, caring about your employees beyond what kind of job they do, breeds loyalty and improves the overall quality of their work," says Shaun Duvall, a farm management consultant based in Wisconsin.

Successful managers keep employees motivated, but that's not always easy. One technique Soriano likes is a negotiated performance appraisal. Unlike a traditional appraisal, the negotiated version can help you jointly develop a plan for performance expectations and improvement.

BENEFIT FROM MISTAKES.

When employees make a mistake, the situation is best used as an opportunity to motivate workers to improve, Duvall says.

When a mistake happens, ask what was happening when it took place. Were your employees in a hurry, distracted or careless? What was going on in their minds? This is preferable to asking them why they did it, which will only elicit an excuse, she says.

Duvall also suggests asking workers how they think the mistake has affected the entire farm. Try to not ask "yes" or "no" questions. "You are looking for thought and input from the employee," she says.

DEVELOP A TOP TRAINING PROGRAM.

Inadequate worker training is one of the top problems for farm employers, in Duvall's view. "People need to be trained; it can't be assumed they know how to do the job just because you do," she says.

Overall, many producers lack knowledge about best employment practices, and some do not have an employee handbook, which Duvall believes is essential. It's not only employees who need to be trained; employers, too, need training on how to best manage their work force. "It takes more than just learning on the job," she adds.

*Discover more employee management techniques that can be used on your farm at www.TopProducer-Online.com*¹

References

1. www.topproducer-online.com

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