

How to Be the Kind of Employer You Would Want to Work For

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It's a sad fact that many agricultural businesspeople have gotten too good at what they do. If this statement sounds wrong to you, examine the theory behind it. Producers have gotten better at producing, in many cases, allowing their businesses to grow. But with those larger businesses come more responsibilities and, frequently, more need for labor that, at one time, would have been provided by an individual family. Both declining family sizes and larger operations have increased the overall need for hired labor. Unfortunately, the management of that labor is an area where most producers have no interest or formal training, resulting in a spectrum of challenges and frustrations that leave many managers hovering between a decision to expand or not. Those who choose to curb growth are unable to, perhaps, make the most efficient use of their resources, frequently working more hours than they should to make up for an overall labor shortage. Those who choose to expand and hire labor are forced to deal with challenges, great and small, that can take their attention away from the aspects of the business they enjoy most. Therefore, they have gotten so good at doing what they do that they don't do it anymore.

Human resource management does not have to be a thorn in every agricultural employer's side. There are ways for some individuals to take on non-family workers, blend them into the existing framework of the business, and enjoy a much more enjoyable and relaxing work environment where the owner/operator is not constantly concerned with the day-to-day management of every aspect of the business.

Other employers may have more difficulty with this process. They may see the additional employees as just an additional thing to manage. They may find themselves frequently saying, "it's faster and easier for me to just do it myself." Or, perhaps they might say, "I don't know what I'm paying them for, I end up doing all the work."

If either of these sentences sound familiar to you, ask yourself a hard question to answer: why? An even harder question to answer might be, "would *you* like working for *you*?"

No one ever said that employee management would be easy, but it doesn't have to be difficult. If there were one rule relating the management of human resources in agriculture it would be golden—do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

1. Use Job Descriptions

Many agricultural managers are anti-job description because they feel having a written account for a person's position will either open the business up to legal risks or allow that person to say, "I'm not going to do that. It isn't in my job description." Those are two myths that are attached to job descriptions. In fact, having a well-written job description can help minimize the chance of either of those things happening.

In recent years, job descriptions have become very popular as valuable instruments of employee management. They give potential and current employees an accurate picture of the position. The last thing an employer wants to do is hire someone who has a misperception about what the position will entail. That person, in that situation, is almost doomed from the start. A comparable problem arises when an existing employee is unclear about what the day-today and long-term expectations are about his or her position.

Also, the job description is the best place for an employer to communicate to the employee exactly what the performance standards are for that position. It is a common trap that most agricultural managers fall into, assuming their employees know what is expected of them. But as one employee once said, "If they'd only show me the hoops, I'd jump through them."

A job description is always subject to change. It should change and evolve with the business, position, and employee. It can be as detailed or general, as need be, as long as it conveys the requirements an employee will have to meet to be successful in the position.

From employee recruitment and selection to performance evaluation and compensation, managers can use job descriptions to ensure that the business and the employee have the same perceptions of the position and performance expectations.

2. Lay out the ground rules.

No one likes to play in a game where the other players make up the rules as they go along. For many agricultural employees, that's exactly the kind of situation in which they work. An owner or manager tells the employees what their compensation package is going to contain, or what the typical workweek will look like, or what the business policy on vacation time will be at exactly the moment when the employer needs to make a point. That is information that should be laid out, explicitly, in advance. For example, even if the business has always had a no-smoking policy, it will look bad if that point is only brought out after the manager sees the employee smoking on business property. That is a rule that needs to be clearly defined and presented to all employees.

The best way to lay out the ground rules is through the employee handbook. Most managers put off writing handbooks because they either don't know how to start or they expect it to be an easy, three week process and they eventually abandon it after they realize that it is very difficult and time-consuming.

An employee handbook will typically contain several sections:

a. A statement of the organization's Mission, Vision, and Values

These are incredibly important things to communicate because they state to employees exactly what the business is about. They are the framework around which all other things are built.

b. A detailed outline of the business's compensation elements.

Employers should take all possible precautions to make sure that an employee has the same expectations of a compensation package as the employer. It can ruin a work relationship when the employer, for example, tells an employee that he/she can have two weeks of vacation time and the employee hears that as being fourteen days that he/she can use at any point in a year. If the employer means for there to be limitations on when/how vacation days can be used, those limitations must be clearly communicated to the employee at the earliest possible time.

Also, the employer must communicate to the employee what the total value of the compensation package is. This may be done through the handbook but, more likely, would be done throughout the year by slipping a piece of paper in with the employee's pay check that outlines exactly what the cash value of all the non-cash compensation elements is.

- c. A statement of the business's protocols and safety procedures.

This is incredibly important not only from a human resource management standpoint but also from a legal perspective. Agriculture is the second deadliest industry in the country. If you think there are not safety issues on your farm, look around. Consider how many of your employees have a strong background in your industry and then ask yourself how easy it might be for someone to get hurt. By outlining how important safety is to your business and then highlighting the dangers of your operation, you make a statement that you value safety and are committed to maintaining a safe work environment.

- d. Lay out expectations, standards, and consequences.

What expectations do you have about professional courtesy or timeliness or animal welfare? What standards have you set for yourself and your family about the quality of work and of life? What consequences will be met if they do not keep with these expectations and consequences?

For almost every employer, there is something that they can refer to and say, "We don't do that here." Employees need to know what those things are before they learn the hard way. Some of those things might be intangible, like making a commitment to always respect your coworkers and refrain from derogatory comments. Other aspects might be easy to define, like the business's policy on reckless behavior or animal cruelty.

3. Provide proper training.

If there is one area where agricultural employers frequently fall short, it is in new employee training and orientation. Many times, agricultural employers wait until the last minute, either out of necessity or design, before they hire a new employee. What this means is that the new person isn't always just thrown into the deep end of the pool to see if they can swim. They are sometimes thrown off of a cliff to see if they can fly.

Some new employees have no experience with businesses like yours. You may expect to hold that person's hand and give them some guidance for the first few days. The trouble is that a few days is not enough time. It takes thirty days for a new employee to be fully oriented into a business. It takes 365 days for an employee to be fully trained—that meaning, a person has to see one full year of an operation before they can know exactly what can and will happen within a business.

Even employees who are, perhaps, experienced in the industry but are new to your business will need training and orientation. Just because a person has worked in a business like yours does not mean that there will not be things that he or she will have to learn about your business specifically. For example, why do employees never park on the south side of the barn? Why do you store those chemicals in that shed? Which place is the Frasier place? Every business speaks its own, individual, language. Be patient and thorough with people who are trying to learn to speak yours.

4. Meet the employee's needs.

One of the biggest mistakes an employer can make is to make a large investment of time or money to initiate compensation elements that his/her employees do not need or want. Successful compensation packages are really total rewards systems, containing non-monetary, direct, and indirect elements all based on the objectives of the employer and the needs of the employees.

Non-Monetary Compensation can include any benefit an employee receives from an employer or job that does not involve tangible value. This includes career and social rewards such as job security, flexible hours, and opportunity for growth, praise and recognition, task enjoyment, and friendships.

Direct Compensation is an employee's base wage. It can be an annual salary, hourly wage or any performance-based pay that an employee receives, such as profit-sharing bonuses.

Indirect Compensation is far more varied, including everything from legally required public protection programs such as Social Security to health insurance, retirement programs, paid leave, child care or housing.

Employers have a wide variety of compensation elements from which to choose. By combining many of these compensation alternatives, progressive managers can create compensation packages that are as individual as the employees who receive them.

Some indirect compensation elements are required by law: social security, unemployment and disability payments. Other indirect elements are up to the employer and can offer excellent ways to provide benefits to the employees and the employer as well. For example, a working mother may take a lower-paying job with flexible hours that will allow her to be home when her children get home from school. A recent graduate may be looking for stable work and also an affordable place to live. Both of these individuals have different needs and, therefore, would appreciate different compensation elements.

In a tight labor market, indirect compensation becomes increasingly important. Businesses that cannot compete with high cash wages can offer very individualized alternatives that meet the needs of the people you want to employ. Such creative compensation alternatives are the small business's competitive advantage.

5. Understand satisfaction.

Every employer should be concerned about how satisfied his or her employees are with their jobs. Unfortunately, that is something that is hard to quantify. A number of factors probably influence a person's satisfaction with his or her job. According to

research by Hackman and Lawler, satisfaction hinges on four core dimensions—Feedback, Autonomy, Variety, and Task Identity (Lawler).

Feedback satisfaction hinges on the quantity and quality of job evaluation given to the employee by the owner or manager. It is also a function of the employee's access to job performance mechanisms (such as mortality rates or feed conversions) that have employee evaluation intrinsic in them (Lawler).

According to Lawler, "The job must allow a worker to feel personally responsible for a meaningful portion of his work." This sense of Autonomy is measured by asking questions of the employees about their ownership of their work and the degree of authority they have over how they perform their tasks (Lawler).

Task Identity is defined as, "a very clear cycle of perceived closure and high visibility of the finished product." Task Identity relates to how employees perceive where the employee fits into the larger farm scheme (Lawler).

According to the Lawler literature, "High variety jobs typically tap a number of different skills that may be important to the employee." It is important to stress the element of challenge, not just difference when evaluating variety. If an employee performs different tasks that use the same skill sets and none of those tasks challenge the employee, that job, for that employee, is low on variety (Lawler).

So, as you consider how to better be the kind of boss that you would like to work for, consider the four core dimensions and try to arrange work schedules and responsibilities in a way that allows each of your employees to truly maximize his or her job satisfaction.

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