

Tips for Managing **PERSONNEL**

BY JINA MARTIN & ABRA UNGEHEUER



First in a three-part series

Hired hands sometimes can be a handful, and people can be more difficult to manage than cattle. It doesn't have to be that way. Successfully managing people can lead to a harmonious and efficient operation.

While some of the same basic management principles apply, managing people on a cattle operation isn't the same as managing a white-collar work force in an office setting.

"At an office, employers have control over their employees, and they see them all of the time," says Dean Callender, executive director for the Agricultural Personnel Management Association. "On a cattle operation, employers might not see their employees the majority of the time. Employers must have faith that their employees are doing what they are supposed to."

For cattle operation employees, this means they must

like what they are doing since they have to be self-motivated, Callender says. No one is there to look over their shoulders and make them do their work.

Start off right

Managing people starts before they set foot on the premises. Employers must know what they expect from an employee and must communicate those expectations in their recruitment advertising, says Bruce Prince, associate professor and head of the department of management at Kansas State University (K-State). Employers know the job and what key skills and abilities are required, and they need to express these clearly to potential employees, Prince says.

Throughout the process of hiring, from the first announcement of the position to the new employee's first day, the rancher should give a realistic job preview, says Gregory Billikopf, labor management

farm advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension Service.

"The more clearly and accurate[ly] a rancher can depict the job, the better the chances the operator will select someone who will work best in this situation," Billikopf says. "The operator should describe the offering without putting a 'good' or 'bad' label on it and let the employee select them out."

Prince says that, although it may be tempting to gloss over the negative aspects of the job, it is important to give a truthful description. If a rosy picture is painted, reality may hit the employee hard.

Sarah Fogleman, K-State Extension agricultural economist, agrees that selecting an employee is among the most important decisions a manager makes. In order to do an effective job of hiring employees, certain needs must be considered.

Don't underestimate the role

your employees can play in helping you hire. Build an applicant pool starting with your own employees, Fogleman says. "If you have a good employee, they most likely spend time with other people of similar character."

According to one study, Fogleman says, the most successful employee-recruitment methods used by agricultural employers are word of mouth and referrals from current or former employees.

When an employee is hired and begins work with an operation, the operator must clearly define expectations for the employee, Prince says.

"It's as simple as saying, 'Here's what we need from you' and outlining the job requirements," he says. "The No. 1 cause of performance problems is that employees don't understand what is expected of them. They need a target to work toward."

Fogleman strongly recommends employers provide written job descriptions for all employees. "Include skills and specific tasks relating to the job," she says. Many times, especially on a farm operation, an employer assumes that the employees understand their responsibilities.

Not only can job descriptions help ensure better communication about responsibilities within an operation, they also provide employees with clear performance expectations.

It's critical to help employees understand the bigger picture. They might tend to focus on their own requirements and forget about the entire operation. It's necessary that they realize they are part of a team, Prince says.

On a cattle operation, employees might be sent to work individually at different tasks, but they all are working toward one goal: efficiency. Each individual employee plays an important part in the whole picture, and it is important that the employer express this to each employee, Prince says. This will

help the employees to recognize their own importance.

Cattle operations might have a small number of employees compared to other businesses, but having fewer employees can be to an employer's benefit, Billikopf says.

"A smaller number of employees allows the employer to feel like they still have a pulse on what is going on," Billikopf says. "They have a great opportunity to maintain a personal relationship with each employee."

From a production standpoint, there are downsides to having fewer employees, Billikopf says. If one employee is sick, the absence is felt more in the operation; in a larger operation, one missing employee might not be noticed as much.

Recognition goes a long way

When an employee does a good job or goes the extra mile, it's important to recognize their extra effort, Billikopf says. "Try to avoid the phrase 'You're a good worker.' Use a specific example for the work they did."

A thank-you several days later is effective. If you wait and thank them later, it means more than when it first happens, Billikopf explains. "It shows the employee that you still remember what they did, and it shows them how much it really meant [to] you. It shows that employee how important they are to your operation and that their efforts are recognized."

Pay increases or incentives are another form of recognition, but Billikopf says that employers tend to fall short in giving interpersonal comments. Most employers know employees appreciate raises, but they don't realize that kind words can go a long way, too. The best recognition would be a combination of both interpersonal comments and pay incentives, Billikopf says.

Many employers offer employee rewards through noncash incentives in a compensation package. The package may include retirement



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programs, insurance benefits, subsidized housing, use of farm trucks and machinery, or meals. However, employees do not always realize the actual value of these benefits.

"Employers need to help their employees understand the value of their benefits package,"

Fogleman says.

When developing a compensation package for your operation, Fogleman suggests asking "What do you want your compensation package to say?" For instance, an operation that values family will strive to arrange work schedules, benefits and rewards that reflect that value within the operation.

Rewards should come randomly instead of at specific times of the year. By doing so, employees truly will appreciate the value of the reward instead of expecting it as a regular part of employee compensation.

Make improvements through feedback

The occasional comment on an employee's work is not enough to improve employee performance on a continual basis. Prince recommends holding summary reviews of an employee's performance. Reviews give the employer a chance to evaluate the employee's progress and to provide feedback.

"Year-end reviews are a good way to summarize an employee's

performance and pull things into perspective," Prince says.

Fogleman suggests four reasons why employers hate to conduct performance reviews:

1. They (the employer) can hurt someone's feelings;
2. Someone can hurt their feelings;
3. They hate confrontation; and
4. They don't know how to do one.

However, when reviews are required within a business, they can increase profitability, business performance and employee performance.

"Do [evaluations] on a regular basis so the employee can understand it's just something that's done around here," Fogleman suggests. That will reduce apprehension about them.

In order to maintain the integrity of performance reviews, bonus time or raises should not be linked with them. The focus should be on training and improvement — not monetary rewards. Once the evaluation has been conducted, "the employee must take responsibility for improvement," Fogleman says. However, employees also must have the opportunity to evaluate the manager during the process.

Employees may get defensive and angry during performance reviews because they are protecting their self-interests,

Prince says. Employees are primed to disagree on causes of poor performance.

"The employee always has a contextual explanation. They tend to externalize performance problems," Prince says. "If the employee can't control the external factor, it's easy for them to defend themselves."

Employees look at external factors, while employers might not look at the situation but instead focus on the personal factors. When employers notice poor work performance, they might jump to the conclusion that it was based on the employee's laziness or poor work habits.

As an employer, it is important to listen to an employee's reasoning. A particularly difficult personal situation may be causing the poor performance.

"Be sensitive to your employee's contextual explanation," Prince says. "Don't ignore what they have to say."

An important element of a review is an employer's listening to the employee, Prince says. The employee should do most of the talking by giving a self-review and adding input. It is important to get employees to communicate because it will allow them to feel that the review was fair and that they were able to voice their opinion.

Effective communication can be arranged by asking personnel to bring answers to a few challenging questions given ahead of time, Billikopf says. For example, an employer could ask employees to make a list of positive contributions they bring to the operation, as well as of areas in which they need to improve. This will allow employees to focus their attention on these areas and to drive the review discussion.

"Human nature is such that we are more likely to want to put forth our own shortcomings than to have someone point them out," Billikopf says. "This is especially true if we have reason to believe that someone will bring up some of these shortcomings."

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During reviews it is also important that an employer focus on an employee's good performances — not just the negative aspects, which leads to people feeling underappreciated, Prince says.

When a worker does point out a fault, the employer can ask the employee what steps will be taken to correct the challenge, Billikopf says. It is also useful for

employers to ask if they can help the employee reach a goal.

Regarding the importance of feedback within the operation, Fogleman concludes, "It is already going on. Make sure it's happening the way you want."

Make it happen

You, as an employer, can improve employee productivity by applying these methods to

your operation. Make an effort to hire the right person for the job.

Once employees have been assigned specific responsibilities, reward them with feedback or compensation. Provide performance reviews in which both employee and employer take responsibility for correcting behaviors that may be hindering the day-to-day operation.

Everyone must commit to improving upon their strengths.

Overall, the most important

part of an employer-employee relationship is communication. Without it, misconceptions brew and destroy the relationship.

"Ask an employee questions to gain a better understanding of their perspective," Billikopf says. "Problems arise because no one knows what the other is thinking."



Editor's note: *Jina Martin is a May 2000 graduate of K-State and a participant in our Young Guns Student Writers Program.*