

# 8 Ways to Help Employees Excel

by *Kindra Gordon*

**A**s the “boss” of a business — be it a farm, ranch, feedyard or traditional office setting — managing employees can often be a challenge. But with a few key human resource management tips, anyone can become a better boss or supervisor, say Bob Milligan, an emeritus professor from Cornell University, and Bernie Erven, an Ohio State University emeritus professor. Both men have devoted their careers to human resource management issues and today work as human resource consultants to the livestock industry.

Milligan likes to use the sports analogy of a coach and his or her team when talking about managing employees.

“In order to play the game, the players must be familiar with the field or court, they must understand the rules of the game, and they must develop skills with training from their coaches,” he says. “Officials must also be involved to interpret and enforce the rules during the game, and a procedure to keep score and determine who is winning must also be in place. Without those rules, procedures and the ability to keep score, the game would likely be riddled with frustration and arguments by the players.”

All total, Milligan calls this “chalking the field.” And, he says, it is as important in the workplace as it is in sports.

In a ranch setting, he says, “supervisors need to ‘chalk the field’ for ranch employees so the rules of the game and expectations are understood, and employees are better able to utilize their skills, energy, creativity and leadership to personally succeed and contribute to the success of the business.”

Here, the duo offers eight tips to help employees excel in their jobs, and they emphasize that these tips are as important for family members who are employees of the business as they are for hired employees:

**1 Share the business vision, mission, core values and goals.** These facilitate everyone being engaged in and committed to the ranch’s success, Milligan says. They identify for the employee what is important to the ranch and enable

him or her to make decisions that will be in the best interest of the business.

**2 Identify standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the business.** These are the day-to-day procedures used to get things done on the ranch or in the business. Again using the sports analogy as an example, Milligan points out that the coaching staff develops the “plays” that the team will execute. These plays — be they offensive schemes, defensive alignment, special teams, etc. — enable the players to excel.

“Similarly, ranch SOPs developed by management and supervisors, enable the employees to excel and clarify how tasks are expected to be completed,” he says.

For example, for one ranch the branding SOP may be roping and dragging calves, while processing calves through a chute may be the SOP for another ranch. Animal handling and welfare procedures are also important SOPs to identify and communicate with employees to ensure quality assurance practices are in place, points out Ohio’s Erven.

**3 Be clear about job responsibilities.** Erven is a big proponent of using written job descriptions to help clarify to employees who is expected to do which tasks. Job descriptions should be developed and shared with all individuals involved in the ranch, he recommends. He

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adds that these do not need to be complex; a job description that is one page in length and written in simple terms will do.

**4 Define policies and consequences for failing to follow rules and policies.** Just as sports officials adhere to a rulebook when officiating a game, supervisors must define the consequences for employees who do not follow ranch or business policies, Milligan says. Such policies and procedures might address daily starting times, absences, SOPs for common tasks, following safety rules, alcohol and drugs in the workplace, fighting in the workplace, sexual harassment, treatment of animals, disobedience of instructions and operation of equipment in a manner that threatens others. Policies might also address treatment of co-workers, handling confidential information, family members abusing their family status, etc.

Once these policies and consequences are in place, Erven and Milligan emphasize that “Fairness and consistency in applying these rules is critical.”

**5 Communicate performance expectations.** Establishing quantifiable performance expectations that are directly under the control of the employee allows the employee to monitor how they are doing — putting it in sports terms Milligan says, “whether they are ‘winning’ at their work.” These expectations should:

- ▶ be developed jointly by the supervisor and the employee;
- ▶ define superior performance;
- ▶ be consistent with the vision and goals of the ranch;
- ▶ be challenging, but attainable;
- ▶ be measurable with a timeframe for attainment; and
- ▶ specify resources available to the employee.

Milligan suggests the supervisor and employee should then review performance expectations regularly — typically monthly

— at a collaborative meeting where expected and actual performance is discussed and expectations for the following period are established.

**6 Provide training.** Assuring that people have been trained well to do their jobs is one of a supervisor's most important responsibilities.

"A willingness to invest in training for individuals not only ensures that employees acquire the skills to better contribute to the business's labor needs, but also contributes to job satisfaction for the individual," Milligan says.

He and Erven suggest that training should not be reserved just for new hires — it should be viewed as an on-going investment throughout an employee's career.

**7 Offer rewards as incentive for performance.** A supervisor may also consider rewarding employees for things like surpassing performance expectations or successfully following safety rules, Erven says. Informal rewards in the form of kudos or positive feedback can be offered randomly, but larger monetary bonuses or incentives that may be offered should be tied to performance expectations

and shared with employees in advance so they have the opportunity to strive for those rewards, these experts suggest.

**8 Have a system to keep employees informed.** Communication is often the key ingredient that helps encourage employees to strive for success. Erven and Milligan suggest employee handbooks, regular staff meetings and individual discussions with employees as communication tools that supervisors can use to help make procedures, policies and rules acceptable and productive.

