



► Employee retention begins with ranch culture. If employees are valued like they are the foundation of success for the ranch, they are much more likely to take on more ownership of their work.

# Retaining Good Help

Ninety percent of new employees decide whether to stay in the first six months on the job.

Story & photos by **Paige Nelson**

**W**ade Mackert has worked full-time for White Sands Co. for more than 35 years. Alongside ranch owners Lee and Cindy Miller, Mackert taught the Miller kids the way of the cowboy and is now mentoring the next generation — the grandchildren. “Uncle Wade” even has a namesake, one of Millers’ daughters named her first son, Wade, in honor of the man who helped shape her work ethic and love for land and cattle. Mackert is more than an employee or a friend — he is family.

Mackert is an exception, though. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), people born between 1957 and 1964 averaged 11.3 different jobs from age 18 to 46. That calculates to a different job every two and half years. *Strategies for Employee Retention: A Ranch Manager’s Perspective*, authored by Jennifer

Johnson and Wayne Fahsholtz, says the cost of training a new employee can amount to 150% of that position’s salary.

It is costly and disruptive to have high turnover rates, or a revolving door. Choosing the right person the first time and retaining good employees becomes critical to the sustainability and profitability of the ranch.

## Ranch culture

Johnson explains in her article that employee retention starts with the ranch culture.

“An organization’s culture defines how employees are valued. If people are viewed as the foundation for success, rather than necessary liabilities, their attitudes and

actions will reflect those values,” she explains.

Erik Jacobsen, vice president of Deseret Cattle and Citrus in Saint Cloud, Fla., explains that training and continuing educational opportunities help create loyalty

## 35 Keys to Success Employee Management

in its employees. “We put a lot of effort into developing our employees and future managers,” he says. In addition to entry-level employee training programs, new college graduates are hired into a one-year leadership development program.

“They work in various aspects of the ranch (accounting, seedstock, cow-calf, etc.), and it gives them a pretty good picture of the entire ranching operation before they are promoted to a supervisory position.”

In the seven years Jacobsen has been vice president, he says of Deseret’s 200 employees, “Our turnover is relatively low. It’s low enough, it’s kind of a nonissue.”

## Hiring

Thoughtful, accurate communication prior to hiring an employee will increase the likelihood of finding the right person for the job. In cases where employees’ spouses

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will be involved on the ranch, interviewing spouses together can be a good practice in managing expectations and minimizing misunderstandings, notes Johnson.

Jacobsen says retaining good employees starts with hiring the right people. Deseret uses an internship program for university students to test-drive future qualified employees. "That's helped us do a better job of picking the right people up front," he says.

For more information on the hiring process see *Finding, Hiring, Keeping High-Caliber Ranch Employees* (page 196).

## On-boarding

On-boarding, explains Johnson, is the process of transitioning an accepted applicant into a productive employee.

"Ninety-percent of new employees decide whether to stay in the first six months on the job, and the average employee does not reach full productivity for 45 days or more, so on-boarding is imperative for employee retention," says Johnson.

According to Johnson's article, the process of on-boarding should involve helping employees understand their role in the organization, articulating the vision of the organization, solidifying responsibilities and performance expectations, and meeting other employees.

Effective on-boarding has five steps:

### No. 1: Make good first-impressions.

The Padlock Ranch, a large operation near Sheridan, Wyo., moves new employees into clean housing and furnishes them with a clean vehicle, thus impressing upon them the importance of taking care of the ranch's assets.

**No. 2: Get acquainted with the new employee and clearly discuss expectations, set goals and define roles.** A well-written job description is helpful in this step; it provides a base for accountability and clarity in job function.

**No. 3: Settle in.** There is no day like the first day on the job. Training employees and letting them get to work calms nerves for everyone.

**No. 4: Help new employees adjust to their work environment** by providing performance feedback.

**No. 5: Lastly, employee engagement** happens when the employee has become a productive member of the organization.

On-boarding at Deseret is as simple as three steps, but on average it takes six months to complete. Deseret Cattle and Citrus consists of 14 cow units that range in size from 2,000-3,800 cows. The first day on the job is taken up in filling out paperwork and orientation of the entire ranch. The second day is used for orienting the employee to his or her specific unit. After orientation, the employee is given an on-site checklist, to be



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filled out with their supervisor, to ensure they're getting the training they need.

The checklist can be completed in about six months, but overall ranch training can vary.

"Our process is designed so that people can go as fast or slow as they want, so some people pick it up in 4 to 6 months and some people are 6 to 8 months, but it takes about a year to really get a good grasp on things," adds Jacobsen.

## Strengths/weaknesses

No two employees are exactly alike or will work with others in the same way. The manager's job is to find out "what works." The Padlock Ranch uses personality profiles to help managers most effectively work with employees and help employees most effectively work with each other.

Jacobsen says Deseret uses 360° reviews to help employees learn about themselves. "You have people above the person, beside the person and below the person review them. Then you provide those results to the person to help them see their strengths and weaknesses," he explains.

In Johnson's article she references the book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* saying, "The

authors conclude that good managers work to enhance a person's strengths and manage around weaknesses, rather than focusing on fixing weaknesses."

Jacobsen says supervisors at Deseret Cattle and Citrus have put this concept into practice, "We really have encouraged people to focus on developing their strong areas rather than trying to improve their weaknesses. If you have an area that you have some natural strength in, if you really work at it, you can become very, very good in that area. If you have an area that's a weakness, you may work hard at it and just become average," he says.

## Feedback

Feedback, whether positive or constructive, is not an immediate fix-all.

"The benefits of both influencing change of unacceptable behavior and reinforcing positive behavior accumulate over time," reminds Johnson. She adds that feedback sessions should be scheduled regularly, treated with importance, held in private and be sensitive to the imbalance of power between manager and employee.

Deseret conducts annual performance reviews for its employees and encourages its

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supervisors to meet with each of their crew members on a 3- to 4-month basis to discuss how things are going, what could be done better and what is being done well.

When the need to address problems arises, Johnson suggests that feedback is given in a structured, focused and private manner. One way this can be done is through the Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) System. A manager describes the situation, the behavior observed and that behavior's impact on others. Remember to balance negative feedback with positive feedback to continue a relationship of trust and understanding, she cautions.

"I think when there's coaching needed, that can be done in a non-offensive way. I think if you have a good relationship with the person that you supervise you can sit down and just talk through the particular area that needs to be done better. Then couple that with some areas that are being done well," says Jacobsen.

Managers should be able to take feedback from employees, as well. Padlock Ranch surveys its employees to gauge how they are feeling about management and working conditions on the ranch.

According to Johnson, "Employees who feel that they have the chance to do what they do best have fewer sick days, file fewer worker compensation claims and have fewer accidents on the job."

### Motivation and incentives

Employees who feel valued are motivated to perform well in their jobs. Valued

employees are compensated fairly.

Jacobsen says it is important that compensation is competitive and fair. "But, fair compensation is more of a reason not to leave, than to stay. People stay because they feel good about the company and their supervisor."

Johnson cites *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job* to find out why employees sometimes lack motivation. Employees that are not known individually and appreciated by managers don't feel fulfilled. Those employees, who are unsure of how their

work impacts others aren't satisfied, either. Finally, employees must be able to measure their own

performance and success in order to be pleased with their work environment.

Motivation basically comes down to employee engagement. On Deseret Cattle and Citrus, supervisors are required to make a plan for the upcoming week, then meet with and present it to their crew. The crew reviews the plan and gives feedback. Then, the supervisor finalizes the plan and puts it on the calendar.

"By going through that process the crew buys off on the plan, and they're mentally engaged. When they hit the ground on Monday, they're thinking about what they have to get done that week, not how many hours are left in the day."

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Incentive programs, according to Johnson, are a great way to inspire motivation and can be based on achievement of stated organizational goals, personal achievement within the organization, company profit or others. Incentives and bonuses should be administered both regularly and spontaneously.

Sustainable and profitable ranches have long-term, reliable employees who bring more to the table than they take away; so once you find 'em, keep 'em.



**Editor's Note:** Paige Nelson is a field editor from Rigby, Idaho.



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