

Building A Ranch 'Team'

Padlock Ranch CEO Wayne Fahsholtz shares the importance of developing employee morale.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Headquartered north of Sheridan, Wyo., at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains, the Padlock Ranch was started by Homer and Mildred Scott in 1943 with 3,000 acres and 300 cows. In the nearly seven decades since then, the Scott family has significantly increased the size of the ranch to raise and market more than 11,000 calves a year on nearly 500,000 acres across Wyoming and Montana.

Today, in addition to the cattle, the Padlock Ranch has diversified to include 5,000 acres of irrigated farmland as well as offering fishing, bird and big-game hunting, and working ranch vacations. Thirty-five full-time employees — and up to an additional 40 part-time seasonal workers — are part of the Padlock team.

Wayne Fahsholtz serves as CEO and president of the Padlock Ranch and has the responsibility of guiding those employees to achieve the ranch's vision and goals. When he took the job in 2002, Fahsholtz says the Padlock was at a point where it was ready to put a renewed commitment on being a premium employer.

"I really believe employee success starts with the mindset of the company — or ranch," Fahsholtz says. To that end, he says shortly after he joined the Padlock Ranch the decision was made to focus on becoming an

employer of choice within the region and among the ranch's peers.

Human resource tools of written job descriptions, communication and feedback with employees, and offering benefits that are valued by employees have been essential to the Padlock's effort to build and retain a superior employee team on their ranch.



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recognize individualization of employees. "It's important to understand that everyone is different. People have different strengths, weaknesses and personalities, and people are motivated by different things," Fahsholtz says.

By recognizing those individual differences, management can help employees excel at their strengths to do their job, as well as gain insight into what motivates each employee.

Fahsholtz acknowledges that it is a

difficult balance, saying, "We have to understand that people are individuals and need to be treated as individuals, but we still must also work as a team."

And, he recognizes that human resource management is something that must be worked on continually. "With the changes we've made at Padlock Ranch, we have a very low turnover, which is an indication of some success, but I don't want to say that we have 'arrived.' There will always be challenges and things that can be done better," he says.

As an example, he says, "We don't communicate well enough at times, and our job descriptions are not perfect."

But, he adds, "We've got a really good team. I think it's sort of like a marriage in that there are rough spots, but as members of the same team we have a commitment to work it out and work together. We really want all of us to be proud of the ranch and ride for the brand."

Communication critical

Most importantly, Fahsholtz underscores that employer-employee relationships are about communication.

"In my view, job descriptions and performance evaluations are about communication," he says. "Regardless of an operation's size, writing down ownership's and management's expectations is a way of communicating. Job descriptions and evaluations don't need to be real formal or long, but they do need to be written down and communicated."

With that, he also emphasizes that feedback from management to employees needs to occur frequently.

"Oftentimes we don't say a job was done well and how it impacted or benefited the organization," he says. "The value is in providing feedback at the time something happens — good or bad. It makes no sense to reward — or punish — an employee a week, month or year after the fact."

He adds, "All of us can use encouragement from time to time of who we are, what we are doing and the value we bring to the organization. ... That goes a long way."

And, he concludes, "It's my goal to say at an annual review with an employee that we don't have much to talk about because we've talked about it all along."



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