

Time Crunch

You're short on help. You're stretched too thin. What steps should you take to get back in control?

by Eric Grant

Perhaps more than any other issue facing individual farmers and ranchers today is time. For Tom Field, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University, effective time management begins with improved people management.

Q: How can livestock producers more effectively manage time?

Field: First, improve communication within your business at all levels. This is a big one, because farmers and ranchers tend to be poor communicators, and critical time and costly mistakes are often made because people refused to talk to each other.

Second, develop clear expectations for your employees so they know exactly what you expect from them, where you want them to be, and when you want them to be there.

Third, improve employee training; don't just throw people to the wolves or expect them to know your operations without adequate oversight on your behalf.

Fourth, couple responsibility with accountability. People like to be trusted with responsibility; give them 'ownership' in their day-to-day tasks so that they take pride in what they do. They'll become better employees for your business, and you'll get a better return from your investment in them.

And finally, improve planning and scheduling. People need to know your long-term objectives. Don't expect them to read your mind. If they understand where you're going with your business, they're more likely to help you get there.

Q: How do livestock producers manage labor differently today than they did a generation ago?

Field: This is a tough one, because our culture is producing a generation of young people who do not define hard work, commitment, dedication and workmanship in the same terms as my generation — and certainly not in the same way that my parent's generation did.

As such, production agriculture is finding it difficult to recruit and fill entry- and mid-level positions. A second trend is that non-English-speaking people are increasingly populating the job pool. For these reasons, the contemporary manager must find ways to connect with 'Generation Y' and with a multi-cultural workforce. Awareness and sensitivity to cultural and generational differences is a fundamentally important first step.

Q: What's the best way to manage and prioritize time for yourself and your employees on a day-to-day basis?

Field: You need to maintain a list of daily and weekly action items, but also keep these lists in the context of your long-term business goals. These lists provide you with a basic framework of what you need to do each day — or each hour — in order to accomplish your long-term objectives. You should also review your goals at least monthly to ensure

they're on the right track, and make modifications as necessary to your plans.

Most importantly, don't try to do everything yourself. Too many business owners try to do too much, without properly delegating many of the day-to-day tasks to other people. If you delegate, everyone will be happier and more productive, including yourself.

Q: How should livestock producers balance day-to-day priorities with long-term business pressures and objectives?

Field: The 80:20 rule is in force: 20% of our activities and time tend to produce 80% of the meaningful results. Strategy, planning, financial analysis, production analysis, employee evaluation and training, and self-assessment need to be moved up the list of priorities.

Most of us prefer operations activities to the aforementioned work. The reality is that operational decision-making and time can be spread across other employees, while the strategic elements ultimately need to fall to those in ownership or leadership positions.

Help! Maybe it's time for an outside consultant

Tired of fighting the employee-recruitment battle, or experiencing a high worker turnover? Then consider bringing in outside consultants to bolster your business and improve your time-management capabilities.

"Using experienced professionals on a sub-contractual basis can make good economic sense both for the consultant and customer," says Phil Brink of Brink Inc. "An expert with years of education and experience will cost more on an hourly basis than an employee will, but an outside consultant will often save you money in the long run because their experience and know-how can head off potential problems and correct them in the planning and design phase. They also know from experience which corrective actions work best in a given situation.

"Don't try to do everything yourself. Bring in professionals where needed. You will be more productive and save money in the long run."

