

Put it in Writing

Written job descriptions aren't just for the corporate world; family farms should use them, too.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Whether you're operating a Fortune 500 company or a small family farm, communication remains a critical key to success. So, how can communication be enhanced between employer and employees?

Sarah Fogleman, a Kansas State University Extension ag economist for southeastern Kansas, believes one means is through written job descriptions.

"I especially advise them with family workforces because it helps define zones, and each individual knows what is expected of them," says Fogleman, who has researched human resource management in agricultural operations.

To illustrate the importance of written job descriptions, she poses the question, "Who contributes to your business?" The answer — particularly with family farms — is that it isn't just one person. There are often spouses, children, hired hands, in-laws and sometimes other relatives.

"Therefore, owners and/or employers need to note that everyone comes to the operation from different backgrounds ... often wanting different things," Fogleman says, adding that without communication, those different viewpoints can often lead to conflict.

Thus, to minimize those misunderstandings, Fogleman emphasizes that written job descriptions are essential for all employees involved.

"Whenever I find a family in conflict," she adds, "writing job descriptions is the first thing I have them do. It helps them recognize that often each person has two roles: business and family. And, the more we can separate business conflict from family, the better the situation will be."

Minimize mind reading

Additionally, Fogleman believes that the process of developing written job descriptions teaches many families to talk to each other.

"People confuse proximity for communication," she says. "Just because you ate breakfast at the same table in the morning doesn't mean you discussed the day's work. But, people can't read minds, and putting job descriptions in writing helps bring clarification."

Most importantly, she says, "It's not the piece of paper that is important. It's the

conversation that leads to what's on the paper. You may find out someone is good at something or wants to be responsible for some area."

Ohio State University Professor Emeritus Bernie Erven is a fan of putting job descriptions in writing. He strongly encourages all of his students who are returning to the family farm to develop a job description with their "employer" before graduating.

"Written job descriptions help clarify specific responsibilities and expectations,

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Why traditional bonuses don't work

On the subject of motivating employees, Kansas State University's Sarah Fogleman isn't a big proponent of bosses giving employees a lump-sum bonus at Christmas or other special events. She says they aren't a good idea because they typically don't result in employees' long-term satisfaction.

Instead, Fogleman says, "If you don't give a bonus every year, your employees aren't happy, and it takes a higher bonus amount each time to get the same satisfaction level from the employee."

Thus, she suggests employers should never give the "I'm a nice guy" Christmas bonus.

Does that mean you should never give a bonus? Fogleman says, "No." Rather, she recommends the bonus be tied to performance of the farm or ranch operation. For instance, tie the bonus to reaching a certain bushel-per-acre goal, conception rate among the herd, or average pounds weaned or daily gain amount on calves. Another idea may be to link the goal to safety. And, she says, the reward doesn't always have to be money. It may be a special barbecue meal or event.

"Bonuses should reward people for exceptional performance. That is why it is important to tie it to something everyone can work toward. And, in some years, bonuses may not be earned, but I think it is OK to let employees feel the ups and downs of years due to weather and markets. That is real life," she says.

Fogleman adds that if you are paying employees a fair wage, their livelihood — and job satisfaction — shouldn't hinge on whether or not they receive a bonus.

especially in small businesses and family business, where job descriptions are often vague, informal and continuously changing,” Erven says.

He adds, “Putting the job description in writing clarifies what the employer has in mind. The job description facilitates communication. In turn, the employee has a much better chance of understanding what the employer is thinking, expecting and rewarding.”

Erven found that asking for a written job description from parents gives the student some candid insights into whether Dad and Mom are thinking of the student in a family manner or in a professional manner.

“A parent’s lack of interest in clear communication about job responsibilities suggests that there will be communication difficulties with other issues,” he says.

Fogleman says she has seen job descriptions serve as beneficial tools with employee selection. “With the description in

writing, employer and employee both understand the position and the role that is expected to be filled,” she says. “This is important, because not every person is well-suited for every position.”

Guidelines for writing

Fogleman and Erven recommend several guidelines for writing effective job

descriptions to be used with small businesses and family businesses.

Foremost, Erven says the description doesn’t need to be a long, detailed, legalistic document. Instead, one page is usually sufficient.

Second, the job description should include at least a job title, a one- or two-sentence overview of the job, a list of duties, percentage of time devoted to each duty, who the supervisor is, and qualifications for a person to successfully do the job.

To assist in this process, Erven suggests getting copies of job descriptions from other farmers and from non-farm employers in the community to use as examples. He also offers these tips:

**“Accept that writing job descriptions is time-consuming in the short run and time-saving in the long run.”
—Bernie Erven**

► Write the duties first, then add a title and summary that fit the duties. Erven emphasizes that it is important to describe the job as it is and avoid adding glamorous, but unreal, duties.

► Limit the number of main duties to eight or fewer. He says four or five main duties are ideal, with sub-duties listed below each. Also, begin each duty with an action verb, such as drive, check, change, clean, move, repair, etc., and be sure to state one duty as an elastic clause (for example, assist with other duties for the good of co-workers and the business).

► Keep job descriptions current and accurate, and recognize that they can change and evolve with the employee’s experience, Fogleman says. Make updating job descriptions part of annual performance reviews. Also, take advantage of vacancies as a time to write new job descriptions.

Lastly, Erven says, when feasible, involve experienced employees in writing job descriptions, because they best understand what they are currently doing.

Most importantly, he adds, “Accept that writing job descriptions is time-consuming in the short run and time-saving in the long run.”

