

Be SMART and keep your best

In many instances farming continues to be a family business. Skills are passed from grandparents to parents and children. Because of close proximity, family members know each other's communication style and work habits. Often, thoughts can be communicated with few words. And, since the youngest are subordinate by age, employee management isn't much of an issue.

But, times are changing. Today, even if there's work on the farm, most young people are encouraged to pursue post-secondary education. At the same time, economies of scale mean that farm operations continue to expand in order to compete. Bigger operations require more manpower. The answer is hired help, ranging from temporary or seasonal workers to full-time crews.

Producers understand that their employees are key to the operation's success. Yet, without the family bond, they are looking for ways to ensure that their employees stay.

Canadian trainer Michelle Painchaud says the answer, whether it's family or outside employees, is improved management skills. "While certain people might be born with natural leadership abilities, managing others takes knowledge and practice. Whether you have a thousand employees or one or two, you have a lot to do with how your employees feel about coming to work."

The human resources consultant, who was born and raised on a farm near Winnipeg, recently shared her insight with some successful producers at an AgriSuccess workshop entitled Keep the Best. It was held in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. The workshops are delivered in partnership with the Canadian Farm Business Management Council.

Darrell Gill and his son Clayton farm 2,200 acres and manage a couple hundred head of cattle with the help of Darrell's brother. They drove about an hour from their farm on the border of Alberta and Saskatchewan to see if they could pick up some tips.

"I want to learn how to keep staff motivated and make sure that we keep a good one when we get them," says Darrell. "There's a lot that can pull them away – the lure of the big dollars in the nearby oil patch is just one example."

While salary is certainly a factor in keeping good employees, Painchaud says studies show that for most workers, money is not the biggest motivator. Employees want the intangible stuff.

"Employees want an environment where they like what they do, feel valued and appreciated and are challenged," she explained. "It is to your advantage to keep a good employee



happy. The cost of losing an employee can be as much as three times their salary. Not only do you have to do the work that they were doing while you find a new employee, you have to train someone new. And, there's also a risk that the loss of one employee can demotivate those who are staying."

What is a good manager to do?

Michelle says as managers, farmers must set SMART goals for their employees. SMART stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. Employers must be specific about what they require, how they want it done, the tools to do it and when it needs to be completed. They also need to make sure that the employee can do the job. She advises that SMART goals should be set daily, weekly, monthly and even yearly.

In addition to working SMART, managers must also work FAST. It's all about communication.

"For behaviour to be repeated, it needs to be recognized. Good managers give their employees feedback that is Frequent, Accurate, Specific and Timely. 'Good job today!' doesn't have nearly the impact that 'You did a good job today cleaning up the combine. I appreciate it when the machine is cleaned regularly because we don't seem to have near the breakdowns as when it isn't done'," Michelle said.

Recognizing her audience's hesitance to verbalize such a lengthy compliment, Painchaud asked them which compliment they would rather receive. All agreed that the second one made them feel more appreciated.

Once employees know what their boss expects, the stage is set for a review of the employee's performance. Painchaud suggested an informal review every three months. "It doesn't have to be complicated or take a lot of time. A discussion about how everything is working and a few well-asked questions can help you to ensure that you and the employee are on the same page. It also shows that you are concerned about that person and how they are doing. As well, regular reviews will make your operation appear more businesslike, and hopefully


harder to walk away from. And, if you find out that your employee isn't happy then you can either work things out or you know that you might need to look for someone new."

Kevin Spate, a grain and elk producer from near Morse, Saskatchewan, walked away from the session seeing room for improvement in his management skills. "I've always just let the performance issue slide. Now, I know that if there is a problem, I need to redirect the employee in the right way and right away. This will help both of us."

Darrell also had an ah ha moment when Painchaud talked about communication styles. "I'm someone who sees the big picture and just does things. I need to remember that not everyone that works with me thinks the same way I do. I need to explain myself more clearly, even if it sounds like over-explanation to me. Clayton and I have worked together for so long that we just understand each other and we don't need to talk much. I can't expect that from an employee."

Meanwhile, another producer had his feeling confirmed. He says he really doesn't want to be a manager. He just wants to farm. So, he's delegated the employee management role to his son.

Painchaud says it doesn't have to be highly complicated, but managing employees better in order to keep them engaged takes work.

"I wish that I could just give you a checklist," Painchaud told the audience, "but I can't. Each person is unique. Everyone has different things that motivate them and each accepts feedback in their own way. You need to figure out what works for your own employees. What I can tell you is that if you take the time to communicate and provide positive feedback to your workers, it will make their day and may even help you keep the best." 

AgriSuccess workshops are held throughout the country. Please contact your local Farm Credit Canada office or visit www.AgriSuccess.ca for more information.

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