

Challenge of Leadership

I have enjoyed addressing farmers at events both sides of the Tasman in the last month. The challenge of team leadership and lifting performance appears to be front of mind for many.

A common question has been how to get the highest standards from staff in a tight labour market – especially when there may be considerable difficulty replacing people if addressing issues means they decide to move on.

Experience has taught me there is a real cost in accommodating mediocrity. Having the courage to challenge staff to the highest personal or professional performance standards always pays dividends. More importantly, turning a blind eye to mediocrity or tolerating failure to operate within management or business policies risks diluting the commitment from the rest of the team.

Just like a chain, a team is only as strong as its weakest link.

When a staff member fails to perform expectations or comply with the protocols of your business, it is not only the business that suffers. This situation inevitably translates to a greater load carried by the rest of the team. Allowing double standards makes achievement of quality more difficult and risks confusion. Inferior performance by “rule breakers” can be interpreted as the new standard for all and stop them from striving to meet expectations.

The most serious consequence from such a culture is that top people will move on as they no longer wish to tolerate lack of dedication from their colleagues.

Deal with it now

While addressing these matters can be stressful, there is always a pay back. First it will bring a reality check to the team. After all, you will simply be dealing with what has been obvious to all for some time. I have never seen a situation where a staff member concerned was not aware of the team leader's frustrations.

I also know one sleepless night in anticipation of a difficult conversation more than compensates for the removal of the day in and day out frustrations of those who do not commit themselves or cooperate.

Proactive leadership is about getting on top of these issues, getting them out in front of the team and applying a firm but fair approach to resolving them.

Clearly there is a risk that the staff member concerned may choose to move on or be required to move on. Yes - the labour market is very tight, however I have never seen a farm where cows can't be milked, crops can't be harvested or work wasn't done because of a staff shortage. Employ temporary help, ask for extra effort from the rest of the team or get the family on board. Any of these will be worthwhile if they lead to higher standards and gains in team culture, working relationships and job satisfaction.

All businesses need to focus on continuous improvement. With less people available to run bigger businesses, it goes without saying that teams need to work 'smarter not harder'. One way to release potential is to remove limiting factors. If you have one on your team, be proactive and manage up or manage out.

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