

Teamwork and the fight against the recession

I have been privileged to witness farming's evolution towards best practice for people management over recent years. There's definitely been growth in farmer understanding of how to get the best from and for their staff. However I sense the strategy for most is still relatively one-dimensional.

Most are competent "one on one" managers with job descriptions, performance reviews and contract obligations well in hand. But there is another level. It's an approach that will be vital to fight back in financially challenging times. It's all about effective management of staff as a team.

Success with this depends on mutually agreed values, clear communication and regular investment in relationships at all levels. This collective approach to management will set the platform for team focus and productivity.

For that reason I am always disappointed when I hear indifference from managers towards the value of staff meetings. This is an area where I see there is clearly room for improvement – especially in this challenging financial environment. There are three key benefits.

First, staff meetings are a fundamental tool to inform, consult and eliminate rumour. Given media talk of tight budgets and potential for redundancies it's no surprise staff will be anxious about becoming collateral damage from financial stress on their employers. Without accurate information about the business and its prospects they risk being distracted about the security their job. That's not good for productivity and focus.

Second, they provide a forum to resolve productivity shortfalls or reset goals for tight times. There is no point in trying to do this in the heat of battle and it is not always effective to deal with these issues individually. There needs to be a place where a team can objectively review its targets and disappointments as well as to celebrate its successes. A well run team meeting will provide such a platform.

The third is to make time to constantly build team culture. Investing time to reinforce business and team values, refine policies and maintain team relationships will future proof the business.

Capturing these advantages starts with effective agenda. Lack of contribution from team members often results from the narrowness of topics selected for discussion. What is alleged to be a team meeting can in fact be little more than a tactical briefing if it only focuses rosters, duties and deadlines.

An effective agenda will leave room to focus on the heart and values of the business as well as the quality of relationships within the team. Topics to refine or secure collective commitment to integrity, loyalty, professionalism, punctuality and cooperation encourage healthy discussion and result in greater cohesion. They allow discussion of whole range of areas to focus the team's commitment to each other and the business.

A combination of weekly briefings and more in depth monthly meetings that make time for wider discussion of values and relationships works well. It usually means

problems don't accumulate for more than 30 days and the management focus is more on preventing than solving problems.

To prevail in the fight against tough trading conditions a business must have only one "enemy". There is no room for internal division or lack of trust. Leaders who strive to deliver quality information, show genuine concern for team relationships and season this with a touch of humour get the satisfaction of generating optimism, goal achievement and a winning formula for all.

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