

## **The Problem Solving Forum**

I've recently been working with teams and businesses both sides of the Tasman on a range of people and strategic issues. Most of these assignments have been focused on business maintenance – either performance reviews with staff or annual reviews with owners and their professionals. These meetings have identified some challenges or unforeseen issues. They've equally released significant opportunity. I'm finding the concept of providing a "forum" for discussion of issues in business a real plus.

Some argue that such a formal approach is not needed in farming. The supposedly close working relationships between employers and employees or regular interaction between business partners may lead rural people to think that formal performance reviews, team meetings or board meetings are not relevant in a rural setting.

In my view a quality communicating environment unearths the unexpected to enable proactive relationship management– especially for staff or passive owners in the business.

### ***Who Holds the Power?***

One reason for formality is to empower those with less authority to have their say. While it is possible employment relationship matters can be discussed in an informal manner, this risks the more junior partner in the relationship missing the opportunity to say what is on their mind.

Giving notice of a meeting and getting others involved agenda setting means all are encouraged to have their say. It opens up hidden issues – especially those that start as minor irritations but quickly escalate if left unattended.

If you experience the surprise of an unexpected and long term problem in your business you may want to ask yourself just where was the forum to deal with such an issue.

### ***Monitoring Business Performance***

There is a similar perspective for passive business partners. Often significant decisions are being made day by day by the business partner who is 'hands on' in the farming operation. Communication and consultation with those who share ownership but play a less active role can be minimal.

But decisions made still affect all parties and without full information they can lead to uncertainties for business outlook, risk, workload, lifestyle or family and personal commitments.

I favour a formal process for monitoring and reporting results and management plans – especially in the "husband and wife" partnerships that I work for. Typically one partner is full on managing the farm while the other is juggling family, off farm employment or a business support role that leaves them more remote from day to day decisions.

Setting a formal time to meet and discuss business results each month results in informed opinions expressed in a planned way rather than being dealt with out of context.

This formality enables the partners to identify when they are "in business" or "in personal relationship". It sets boundaries, provides a basis for constructive debate and allows an agenda to be collected and addressed on a regular basis. It avoids the succession of dramas which typifies the lives of some as is evidenced by tension, negativity and frustration.

Formalising business and staff relationships will enhance communication, understanding and objectivity. It will give all involved a chance to raise issues may otherwise result in defensiveness or perceived criticism.

The concept of formal staff management, board meetings, monthly reports and annual reviews is certainly not new in an urban setting. It has much to offer the rural business.

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