

## The Leader's Balancing Act

With the new season now in full swing, there is plenty of pressure on managers to make the right calls and keep their team on task. It's a real balancing act. On one hand there's the risk of over reacting so molehills become mountains. On the other there is the need to maintain standards and accountability.

Success depends on keeping problems and breakdowns in perspective. It means knowing when to apply pressure and when to accept lesser standards in the interest of harmony and getting through peak demands.

In larger teams these sorts of dilemmas can arise when individuals get out of sorts. They can be driven by incompatibility between staff members, physical exhaustion or loss of confidence. They can involve managers or senior staff failing to exercise their authority appropriately and resulting in relationship breakdown. Perhaps the person who was eager for promotion has now found the reality of its demands more than they can cope with.

Dealing with these types of situations requires wisdom, judgement and commitment to leadership.

Commonly these events arise because of an individual's negative attitude and loss of cooperation from the rest of the team. There may be an argument or factions that divide the group. Accusations and disagreements become frequent and relationship breakdowns fester. In the absence of positive action the "grapevine" runs hot with gossip and speculation as tensions and power struggles play out.

First priority when managing these events must be to contain the situation. Don't be tempted to drop everything and have it out with those involved immediately. This response risks signalling that the issue is bigger than it really is. The problem will only be magnified by holding an "inquisition" which may only serve to undermine management structures and authority. Sure, a full understanding of things is important but this must be gained in a way that protects the credibility of all concerned.

A strategy I have found works wonders is to harness the support of the rest of the team before addressing the individual concerned. This may even stretch to asking junior staff to support their supervisor.

The key is to have others accept that the staff member concerned is struggling and without the team's help improvement will be slow at best. The fastest way forward will be through the rest of the group helping 'kick start' the affected staff member's performance. With commitment from the team in place there will be a foundation on which to address the individual's performance.

And that's the second step.

I've long been convinced that naming a problem goes most of the way towards solving it. When an individual is under pressure, it can be very effective to let them know you are aware of the problem but don't intend to deal with it straight away. Rather, you can simply signal you plan to discuss the matter at some future point.

The payoff will be that behaviour causing concern will likely change not on the day you meet to talk - but on the day you name the problem. Letting things go unnoticed is not an option as this just allows them to get worse!

Naming and acknowledging an issue brings things to a head. This is especially effective where moodiness or negative attitudes are detracting from teamwork and atmosphere. It encourages the perpetrator to recognise "the game is up".

Through these tactics it's much easier to move into a review process that calmly addresses the situation, challenges attitudes and agrees remedial actions. Appropriate counselling and communication will get things moving or start an exit strategy for those who don't respond.

Achieving a firm but fair approach built on proactive commitment to and from the team as well as quality communication will defuse tensions and focus on solutions – a vital outcome for a delicate period of the farming calendar.

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