

# Ideas In Practice

**H**ired employees are particularly critical in western United States agriculture. While some labor is provided by farm and ranch owners, their family members, and co-operating neighbors, most production work is performed by hired employees, and the vast majority of field workers are now Latino immigrants. For too many farm business owners, the complexities of employment law, labor market dynamics, and interpersonal relations, compounded by their discomfort in dealing with people from a culture with which they are unfamiliar, ironically feed a reluctance to dig into the field of labor management.

The ideas and concepts found in *Ag Help Wanted – Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor* are best when they are put into action. Ideas in Practice offers highlights of actual managers successfully applying good human resource concepts.

## 100 Years Experience -

### *Consider acquiring outside expertise with an advisory board*

Recognizing his own inexperience and in order to stay in business, a young nursery owner decided he needed advice and assistance from others. An advisory council's main function is to act as a sounding board, and members can provide support, advice, and even act as devil's advocate. Advisors, who are often retired business executives, can propose new business opportunities or suggest ways to expand or diversify the existing business.

They can offer invaluable instruction on everything from finance and personnel management to strategic planning and succession planning. While advisors command no official position in the organization, they can hold business owners accountable to their decisions, and often require justification for new plans.



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# AG HELP WANTED HIGHLIGHTS



## **Diversification Benefits Farm Workers and the Farm Business -**

*Without labor during key harvest periods, leads one farm to decide to diversify its enterprise mix and offer more workers season-long employment*

With a diversified mix of crops, the farm now provides employment for half of their workers for six months or more. Adding organic production, introduces a major off-season enterprise – compost production. In addition, the farm constructed farm-worker housing as part of their efforts to provide longer term employment, paying some of their farm workers to build the housing in the off-season. Longer employment opportunities and quality housing have made this farm a sought after place of employment. Realizing they need good employees to stay competitive, the farm feels the investments in enterprise diversity, housing, and their community are paying off.



## **Investment in Communication Pays Quick Dividends -**

*A successful nursery builds their business on the strength of their market leadership and innovation*



Employee promotion had been based on skill level and often employees who were considered skilled horticulturists were promoted to supervisory positions. Without formal training, each supervisor followed a different approach. Owners soon realized that production skill alone was not enough to qualify an individual for a supervisory role. Supervisors needed training in communication, conflict resolution, and providing and accepting feedback. A series of workshops were organized and supervisors who were quick to grasp the concepts noticed an immediate improvement in both the attitude and productivity of their workers. When workers felt they were being listened to, they had more of a sense of duty to the supervisor, and before long, production was higher than it had ever been. While continuing to value production expertise, also consider communications skills when choosing new supervisors and provide support for continuing development of these skills across all levels of management.

## **Workforce Programs Can Enhance the Operation and Personal Lives -**

*A large Southern Oregon employer is guided by the philosophy that "Everything begins with people"*

A major division of this firm depends on the good work of its nearly 100 year-round and 500 seasonal employees, including the 38 field staff members who have first-line supervisory responsibilities. In 2001, this division invested in these key employees through a program to develop job-related skills in four areas: English, mathematics, horticulture, and computer use. The supervisory employees who took part in the program were all native Spanish-speakers and were paid for the 75-hours of class time, spread over 10 weeks. At the end of the learning program, participants' skills were reassessed, and the program was evaluated on four levels: participant satisfaction, learning, behavior change on the job, and dollar return on investment for the company. Significant gains were identified at every level.

The learning program has contributed to the business as well as supervisor's personal lives in unanticipated ways. Three months after the program: 75 percent of participants has enrolled in ongoing English or GED classes, 25 percent had purchased home computers, three had purchased homes, two had passed citizenship exams, one had passed the Oregon license exam for private applicators of pesticides, many had reported more involvement with their children's education, and many have requested more information about and referrals to educational opportunities. This pilot program brought into sharper focus the gains that can be realized from structured learning at the workplace.





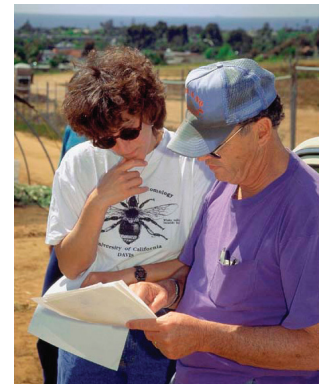
## **Taking Over the Family Farm: The Great Divide -**

*Communication about ground rules, planning for the future and financial management are important and necessary considerations*

A son and his young family returned to the family farm willing to work hard at being a successful farmer, as his father retires in a few years. The father expected the son to work just as hard and as many hours as he did beginning at 4:30 a.m. The son believed that sun-up was an acceptable time to start work each day. Rather than talk with the son, the father began work at 5:30 a.m. The son was bothered by his 70-year old father doing physical labor so early in the day.

After about a year of such problems and frustration, the entire family participated in a county Cooperative Extension program consisting of goal setting, interpersonal skills for farm families, and financial management. In this setting, the two families came to recognize that they never talked about goals for the business, their expectations of each other, or when and how the son would actually take over the farm. Through goal setting and conversation, they set up ground rules, developed plans for the future as to how the son would take over the business, and decided a family meeting would be held once a month to discuss business issues.

A year later, the father was enjoying his retirement, while still helping with the farming as needed. The son was following the plans developed for taking over and became more comfortable following his father's advice. The monthly business meetings were usually short, but everyone believed they were a good time to talk about specific, and sometimes sensitive, issues.

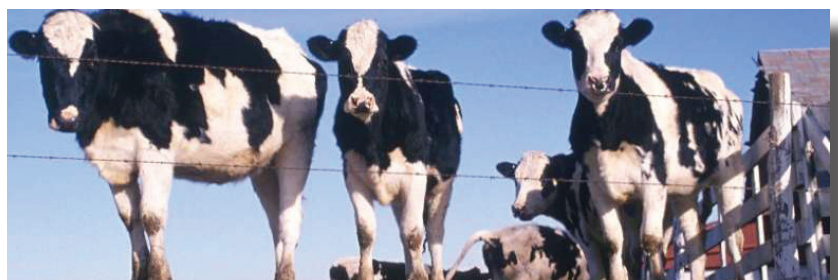


## **Respect Plus Open Communication Makes a Winning Combination -**

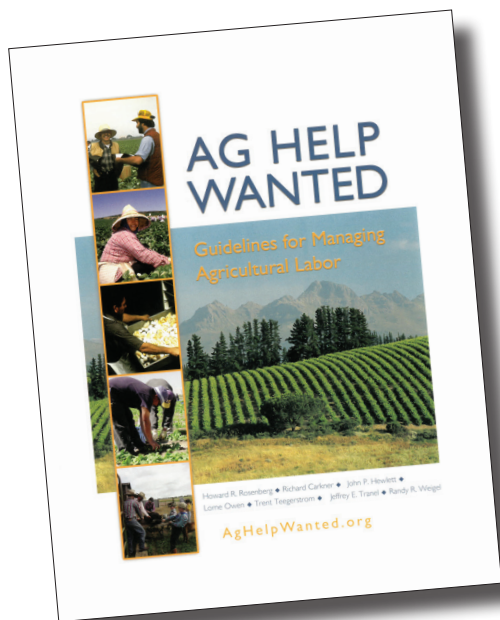
*A medium-sized dairy in Arizona has a worker turnover rate that is the envy of any operation.*

The dairy has been family-owned and operated since 1958, and early in the operation the family developed strong ties with two families whose members were employed in the operation. An enduring mutual respect between the owner's and the worker's families emerged. This relationship is instrumental to the low employee turnover rate on the farm. Over the years, key employees have been members of one of the two families or a personal referral from one of them. The dairy has provided a stable work environment with opportunities for growth. Although other higher paying job opportunities exist, the dairy has never faced a labor shortage or pressures to increase salaries. Clearly, salaries are only part of the equation; creating a safe, comfortable working environment is equally important.

The family attributes the dairy's success to the fact that there is honest and open two-way communication between all the workers on the farm. When an opening become available, the two key employees do the hiring. The dairy's greatest assets are its employees and they are treated with respect and trust.







*Ag Help Wanted* is a guide for owners and managers at every level of agricultural and horticultural operation in the western United States. It provides ideas, practical guidance, and assistance with:

- Planning the division and coordination of work in agricultural production
- Recruiting and selecting employees for agricultural jobs
- Supervising, training, and tapping the motivation of employees to perform well
- Correcting employees and taking disciplinary action if necessary
- Communicating effectively with employees and others

As advertised in the title, this handbook presents guidelines. The term “guidelines” has come to connote legal restrictions and mandates, and indeed guidelines of the regulatory persuasion have a place here. But they are in the context of a management functions framework and are outweighed by guidelines that take the form of example — illustrations based on what other agricultural managers have done and are doing. Other guidelines are made up of theories, concepts, and principles that have been distilled from research or other systematic

observations of management. Much of the material comes from academic research designed to guide practicing managers in various industries. At a bare minimum, it provides a set of terms for thinking and talking more analytically about everyday managerial experience. The book also delivers enough description of technique to help readers who are taken with an idea to act on it.

*Ag Help Wanted* does not offer surefire prescriptions, largely because there are none. Nor does it presume to advise in terms of musts and shoulds. Although it identifies and discusses the utility of many skills, by no means can it possibly build them through reading alone. The authors’ objectives are to enable and encourage professional development—growth of managerial understanding and mindset—by adding to existing sources of usable information, knowledge, tools, and inspiration.

*Ag Help Wanted* is a full-color, 250-page agricultural labor handbook that presents principles, practical examples, legal considerations, and offers additional references in six chapters: Roles and Responsibilities of an Agricultural Employer; Organizational Planning; Staffing the Farm Business; Supervising Agricultural Work; Managing Employee Performance, and Communication and Problem Solving. The text is designed for use in a variety of ways. It can serve as a reference to help cope with problems that arise, a source of ideas for improving management policies or practices, and a base for systematic study of human resource management in agriculture.

To learn more or to order see: [AgHelpWanted.org](http://AgHelpWanted.org).



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