

Communication and Problem Solving

Information is the lifeblood of every organization. It flows through agricultural businesses every day. Communication with workers is integral to hiring and training, helping them understand the business and their role within it, assigning and coordinating work, learning their ideas and problems, building trust, and most other aspects of the working relationship between the employer and employees. Of course, communication among workers facilitates both performance and the social relationships that make the workplace more than simply where a job takes place.

Communication occurs through the spoken word, written word, and gestures (body language), and most managers use them all. Words on paper are often thought of as formal communications, often with legal implications. Other communications are informal notes that serve important purposes, such as alerting the herdsman that a cow is acting abnormally. Informal, oral communications are more numerous, frequent, and ongoing. However, just because an exchange is oral, does not make it informal. Selection interviews, performance evaluation meetings, presentations to the farm advisory board or owners, and verbal warnings can all be considered formal.

When something is written, it is less likely to be recalled or understood differently by the sender, receiver, or third parties. A written record can be referred to and serve as a benchmark for similar communications in the future.

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**AG HELP
WANTED HIGHLIGHTS**

Employment is a contractual relationship. Even where no written agreement exists, the employer's statements, company memos, written policies, application forms, and other communications imply terms of the employment contract. In addition, labor laws give workers many rights that are not contained in written or oral agreements, yet all employment agreements – written or oral, expressed or implied from company actions or the law – are enforceable.

Personnel Policies

Many agricultural employers have found written personnel policies helpful to guide decisions and clarify what workers and managers can expect of one another. Policies can save administrative time, reduce uncertainty for employees, promote consistency of management action, and help reduce the incidence of decisions that violate a public law or a private sense of fairness.



Policies are often communicated via an employee handbook that provide more extensive information about the history and purpose of the business, its goals and values, administrative policies, organizational structure, procedures, and rights and responsibilities. The very existence of a handbook, however, does not make its policy content either logical or effective. Not all farmers and ranchers have the time to develop an employee handbook, but reference books and consulting services provide example policies that can be used verbatim or modified for individual firms.

Simply having policies, even good ones, is not worth much if the people whose decisions they are intended to guide do not know they exist. Some employers carefully stratify their dissemination of policies to employees on a legal or operational need-to-know basis. If policies are not communicated, understood, and followed, they can actually work against or hurt the business.



Dealing One-on-One When Things Go Wrong

Communications in response to performance problems impact agricultural business owners, workers, and public officials for more than the present moment. They have a cumulative and long-lasting effect on relationships. There exists an array of choices in handling a problem incident within the framework of a disciplinary policy or guideline.

How many responses does a manager have to a milker arriving late, the field man asleep in the supply room, the general laborer refusing a work assignment, the irrigator smelling like a brewery, etc.? There are at least nine:

1. Penalty imposition – a penalty (loss of wages, opportunities, status, or comfort) makes clear to the offender that certain behavior is frowned upon, and it sends a strong message to others about standards.
2. Specific warning – clear expressions about unacceptable behavior. They afford employees time to improve and prepare themselves for the possibility of penalties.
3. Vague threat – vague threats can inspire fear, a powerful motivator to most people. But as a way of conveying either technical or administrative information, this type of response does not deliver much. It sometimes leaves the receiver with no clue about what went wrong, what improvement is desired, or what will happen if changes are not achieved.
4. Emphasis of Authority – a statement of rule or command as legitimate and proper. The implication is that failure to obey constitutes violation of the organization. It often carries an implied warning.
5. Avoidance – the easiest response to execute and probably the one most often used. Some people like to rationalize that avoidance allows mild offenses to go by without turning into a big unproductive deal. However, avoidance foregoes the opportunity to communicate about problem behaviors and results.
6. Humoring – coaxing with amusement, flattery, sarcasm, obvious exaggeration or insincerity, or ludicrous talk that usually comes off as friendly, gentle communication. Humoring can defuse tension and put events into a broader perspective, thus paving the way for more constructive discussion.
7. Explanation – providing information that clarifies what the supervisor wants or why. If rationally provided, an explanation usually expresses respect and opens discussion.
8. Appeal to Interest or Values – a justification of the desired behavior that is consistent with the employee's own welfare and beliefs.
9. Problem solving – the presentation of an undesirable behavior or condition as a problem to be resolved jointly. Problem solving usually opens with a question, then the supervisor engages the worker in a discussion of the problem and a search for an acceptable solution.



In practice, the nine types of response are often used in combination. Further, what works well in one situation may only create more problems in another. Supervisors need to know their employees and determine the most effective way to communicate about a problem and to address the fundamental issue.



Effective communication occurs when the sender and receiver of a message both understand the message in the same way, Beliefs, expectations, hopes, and the other thoughts of both parties affect the interpersonal communication process. Communication involves more than just talking. It also takes deciding on what to say and how, listening, decoding both verbal and body signals, and checking back on the accuracy of interpretation.

There are many resources available to business owners, operators, and supervisors at AgHelpWanted.org. They are designed to help employers improve their communications skills by learning more about preventing problems, developing strong interpersonal communication skills, improving understanding about and using good communication tools, and communicating about and resolving employee problems. The site also includes a set of pre-recorded problem work situations and a series of possible manager responses under the headings: Support Links > Video Clips. Text materials in this section may also be helpful to managers looking to improve their response to the many performance and conduct problems that typically arise in the workplace.



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.



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