

For a large and increasing share of farm and livestock firms, hiring and managing labor is basic to the nature and technology of the business. Managers do not “choose” to employ but rather take as a given that they need hired workers, and the choices they face are not about whether to but rather about how to find, engage, and deal with people performing work essential to the enterprise.

Production of labor-intensive crops, such as most tree fruits, typically requires many lower-skilled workers for relatively short periods. Some firms rely heavily on a core of long-term, better-educated employees to look after animals and permanent crops year-round, perform highly skilled or other ongoing tasks, and/or supervise short-term production crews during periods of peak activity. Many owners are accustomed to employing production workers but have difficulty deciding when and how to hire a technical specialist, foreman, or higher level manager to take on supervisory responsibilities.

Why bring more people into the operation at all? The following are just a few of the many economic and noneconomic reasons:

- Use capital and overhead more fully
- Procure expertise needed for new technology or new enterprises
- Improve product quality and timeliness of operations
- Reallocate more of owner or general manager’s time to marketing, input sourcing, financial, and industry functions
- Reduce personal stresses and pressures on current staff
- Create more opportunities for business growth and personal growth of current staff
- Reduce risky behavior and dangerous conditions in the work environment
- Free some of owner or manager’s time for leisure, health, social and family activities

Regardless of why hired help is needed, managing people up and down the line in agricultural operations is worth doing well. Most business owners who seriously assume the role of a human resource manager, however, find that it brings them a new set of professional challenges and personal pressures.

When workers are both capable and on your side, it’s good for the business.

Need to Be a Manager

Success as an agricultural business operator takes more than the knowledge and tools farmers have traditionally used in shaping the growth and sale of commodities. Hard work and smart decisions about managing biological production processes in agriculture are not enough to ensure good operating results, especially for owners who do not perform all the work themselves.

Even farmers who know exactly how they want to have crops, livestock, flowers, or trees handled, how they want their tools and equipment taken care of, and where to market their products face another big set of decisions. A business

owner may make the big decisions about crops, animals, facilities, supplies, and money. But in most agricultural firms, the staff working with these inputs actually produce what generates revenue, and if you don't have those folks working well, you cannot be successful.

What actually is involved in managing human resources? Despite one tongue-in-cheek analysis, a lot:

As nearly everyone knows, a manager has practically nothing to do except: to decide what is to be done; to tell somebody to do it; to listen to reasons why it should not be done, why it should be done by someone else, or why it should be done in a different way; to follow-up to see if the thing has been done; to discover that it has not; to inquire why; to listen to excuses from the person who should have done it; to follow up again to see if the thing has been done, only to discover that it has been done incorrectly; to point out how it should have been done; to conclude that as long as it has been done, it may as well be left where it is; to wonder if it is not time to get rid of a person who cannot do a thing right; to reflect that he or she probably has a family, and that certainly any successor would be just as bad, maybe worse; to consider how much simpler and better the thing would have been done if one had done it oneself in the first place; to reflect sadly that one could have done it right in 20 minutes, and, as things turned out, one had to spend two days to find out why it had taken three weeks for somebody to do it wrong.

—Anonymous



Functions of Management

As tempting as it may be to throw up your hands at this prospect and try to find a way to do all the work yourself, the laws of physics simply will not allow it. A more constructive, classical view is that managers perform the following five broad functions, which result in other people carrying out work integral to the business:

1. Planning—Developing the business purpose, philosophy, goals, and strategies
2. Organizing—Establishing a system of roles and relationships to achieve business goals; dividing the work to be done, defining units (e.g., ranches, departments, crews, jobs) responsible for portions of it, and providing a means of coordination among them
3. Staffing—Attracting, developing, and retaining people able and willing to perform the jobs as organized
4. Leading—Directly influencing people and facilitating their work, generally through interpersonal communications

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