

Roles and Responsibilities of an Agricultural Employer

Some years ago I met a 45-year-old man who was the owner-operator of a large, very successful farm out west. When I asked him about his success, he told me this story:

“The farm was not making an adequate return, so I expanded. I borrowed more money and hired more labor, but it didn’t seem to help much. It just gave me more to do and more to worry about. A tightness in the chest sent me to a doctor, who said I was a prime candidate for a heart attack, that I must slow down, lower the stress level. I went back to the books, considered alternatives, but nothing looked promising.

“Then one night when I couldn’t sleep, I lay there pondering the problems and a thought hit me: I am not a producer; I am an employer of people, and those people produce the product. I am wearing the wrong hat. The next morning I got up and went out and actually purchased a new hat, then went to the library and checked out books on personnel management, business organization, and business relations.

“That was five years ago. Now the farm is making big profits and I have very few problems. On the contrary, my employees are a real source of enjoyment. Of course, I haven’t thrown out my producer hat. I just wear it a lot less often and my health has returned, not because of more sleep but because of much lower stress and better sleep.”

— Allen Shapley, Michigan State University, Emeritus



Many agricultural businesses have a labor force that consists of family members. Some owners decide to add hired personnel as operations grow or demands on their own time prove overwhelming. They tend to see themselves primarily as business people and give little thought to their roles as employers until the idea is triggered by a present or impending crisis.

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