

People Skills: The Biggest Challenge Facing Irish Agriculture

A report for



NUFFIELD IRELAND Farming Scholarships

By John Buckley

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Executive Summary

The Irish dairy industry is entering into a period of rapid change due to the abolition of milk quotas. Nationally, milk production will increase, with an extra 200,000 cows expected to be milked by 2020. As Irish farms continue to grow, so does the need for talented employees. Therefore, good people management practices are critical to raising productivity and for adding value to the dairy industry. For farmers who have built up a strong business over many years and largely through working on their own, it will be difficult to change the mind-set to sharing power and giving responsibility to others. There is a real worry that farmers will burn out in this new era unless they effectively upskill on good people management skills. The industry must realise that it has to invest in people and realise that this is a long-term project.

“It takes two years to build a farm, it takes ten years to build the capacity in a person to run that farm” – (Interview -Stuart Taylor NZ)

The objective of this report is to provide advice and knowledge to farmers looking to attract and retain staff. The study consisted of travelling to nine countries on four continents visiting farmers, farm consultants and industry leaders the length and breadth of each country. How can Irish farmers become the employer-of-choice for their young people through the acquiring of people management skills, which farmers throughout the world regard as necessary? We are world class at producing quality milk, why would we not strive to be world class employers and provide world class work places as well?

The role of a dairy farmer has changed over time. The physical work element has fallen significantly on the list of priorities, with farmers now needing to show more leadership and business skills.

“We think we milk cows, no we actually manage people” – (Interview-Colin Glass)

To begin, a detailed analysis of the farm system and the people management skills of the farmer is necessary before expansion. All solutions need to be viable and profitable along with providing an attractive lifestyle to all involved. Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

Farmers need to understand the position that needs to be filled to better enable certain skill sets to be targeted and to set clear expectations of the new staff member, therefore, resulting in a clear plan with no grey areas going forward.

Technology is constantly evolving and is replacing much of the world's workforce. It has the ability to make communication much easier and simpler and this can make a farm work more efficient and productive.

Today staff want flexibility; they want routine, rostered time off with a fair and competitive remuneration. They want to be treated with respect, they want to learn, be part of something bigger and all within a positive and progressive atmosphere. Farmers should actively seek to understand an employee's short, medium and long term goals and in turn help their employees achieve these goals through their work. One of the big learnings from the author's travels is that bonuses are only a short term motivator, and operating bonuses will lead to an increased administration burden and become anticipated.

"Paying top dollar doesn't automatically attract skilled people who are committed to helping you reach your farm business objectives – (Lynn Perry, Integrity Human Resources Services, Canada)

While staff turnover is inevitable, the ability to retain staff is one of the most underrated attributes of many successful businesses. Retaining quality people is about ensuring good employees stay in your business because they have interesting and rewarding jobs. It costs double a person's salary to replace a member of staff therefore it is cheaper to invest in good people rather than replace. Remember, if an employee fails, or makes a mistake, it is typically the employer's fault. Either the employee was mis-trained or the communication was not clear.

Consistently underperforming or incompetent employees need to be removed immediately. These 'bad eggs' will have a negative impact on the culture and on staff morale. Farmers will need to know when an employee needs support to help them improve their performance, and when that employee needs to be dismissed. This requires leadership and a good understanding of people.

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Foreword

I grew up on our family dairy farm with my parents and my sister Ann. From a young age I have been interested in and passionate about agriculture. My father has always been a progressive man, always willing to experiment with new methods and not afraid to take a chance. Both my parents worked extremely hard, long hours, seven days a week and for little reward. It is because of their passion and attitude that my interest in dairy farming never waned during the Celtic Tiger era in Ireland. Throughout my years in secondary school, teachers and guidance councillors insisted that I would



be better off to pursue a more lucrative career in something other than agriculture. At times it was difficult to disagree with them. The majority of my class mates and friends got involved in construction. Working hours were good and the pay was highly competitive.

My father was a member of a discussion group for many years. When possible, he would always bring me along. As a result, the dairy industry and all its problems and challenges were very familiar to me. The West Cork co-ops along with Carbery, Teagasc and some very open minded farmers began focusing a lot more on grass, breeding for solids, spring calving and most importantly, profit. All this experience from a very young age convinced me that farming was the best career for me to pursue.

The one common theme which kept cropping up everywhere during my youth was the grass based dairy model in New Zealand. During my time in Agricultural College I availed of an opportunity to work on two New Zealand farms. This experience had a profound impact on my worldview. The simplicity of the dairy systems, focused on working to live rather than living to work was very attractive.

A long standing debate in Ireland is, which is the best system, or the right system of dairy farming? During a period I managed a high input system in the UK, which was an experience to learn more about the issues involved in this debate. What became apparent is that all systems work, they all make a profit, but the most important question to ask one's self is

which system best suits the ability of the people involved. Which system is best aligned to an individual's personal and business goals?

In 2010 I returned home to enter into a Milk Production Partnership with my parents on our home farm. In 2013 I was lucky enough to be awarded the Macra Na Feirme/FBD Young Farmer of the Year title and the following year I was awarded this Nuffield Scholarship.

It became apparent that the dairy industry was entering a period of rapid change. With quotas being abolished, I could see opportunities in non-traditional dairying parts of the country to set up a second dairy farm. This was the motivation to embark on a Nuffield Scholarship to understand and research how managing multiple dairy farms could work in an Irish context.

After commencing the Global Focus Program it became evident that to grow any business, people and people skills are critical and this is one of my greatest weaknesses. This experience, coupled with numerous conversations with farmers struggling to attract and retain people on their expanding dairy farms during 2015 changed the focus of my Nuffield Scholarship, to the subject of how can we attract, retain and grow people as farmers.

When I typed 'attracting and retaining employees' into Google, hundreds of results appeared. There are hundreds upon hundreds of books, YouTube videos, websites and Ted talks dedicated to this topic. What becomes apparent very quickly is that retaining employees is not only an agricultural related issue. Employers across a wide range of sectors and professions struggle with what is deemed as one of the most under rated attributes of most successful businesses. It is reassuring in a way because it also means there are solutions.

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The Brazil Global Focus Program was a major eye-opening experience and challenged many of my assumptions. Meeting a diverse range of people allowed me to obtain new insights into my subject. I would like to thank Ben Allomes, Ben Haslett, Joe Burke, Michael Craig, Colin Hudon, Jonathon Dyer, Reece Curwen, Andrew Freeth and Tom Quigley.

Then I owe a thank you to everyone who hosted me during the Global Focus Program and during my personal travel.

To my parents Corney and Sheila, Marguerite my wife, my little man Gearóid and my sister Ann thank you all for your work and support for the past two years.

Finally, thanks to friends, family and neighbours who have helped on the farm while I was travelling.

Abbreviations

CSO – Central Statics Office

GFP – Global Focus Program

SOP – Standard Operating Procedure

PPE – Personal Protective Equipment

CAHRC – Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council

JLC - Joint Labour Committee

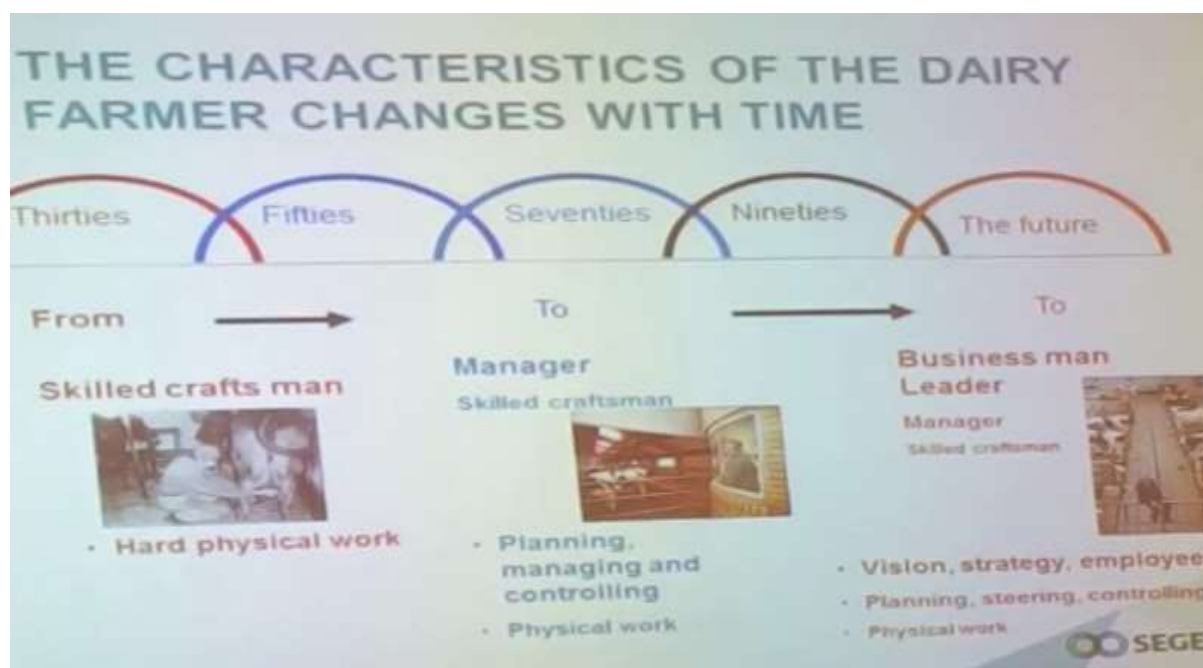
Objectives

- To provide advice and knowledge to farmers looking to attract and retain staff.
- Identify the people management skills farmers throughout the world regard as necessary.
- How can Irish farmers become the employer-of-choice for young people?
- What can industry and other stakeholders do to help and support farmers become better employers?

Introduction

There is a long and proud tradition of family farming in Ireland. Down through the generations on Irish farms the need for additional labour at busy periods in the farming calendar has been filled by spouses, sons, daughters and the wider network of family and neighbours. It is a system that has served Irish agriculture well, but the majority of these extra hours work have gone without financial reward. The reward for the labour was usually in the form of social capital and the establishment of reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships.

Both the National Farm Survey and the Teagasc Profit Monitor put no value on the farmer's work or on the labour from family members. Therefore is it any wonder that farmers struggle to value the work their employees do for them? This is a ridiculous practice that needs to change. Another bug bear of the author, is to state that a farmer is coping with the workload on their farm by using some relief or casual help. What is relief or casual help? How can it be defined? There is no mention of the hours worked by this type of employee and this can be very misleading to other farmers trying to run their farms using a similar approach.



This slide from Seges in Denmark illustrates how the role of a Dairy Farmer has changed over time. The future according to Seges will be one where Dairy farmers are Business men and women as leaders. The physical work has now fallen well down their list of priorities.

Farm Structures Data for Ireland		
Relevant Year	Statistic	Relevant Data
2013	Farm Holdings	139,600
2013	Average Farm Size	32.5 Hectares
2013	Family Farm Holders by Age	5.9% < 35; 52.7% > 55
2016 ⁽¹⁾	Employment in Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing (CSO)	109,300

¹ Persons employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing is from the CSO's Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS), Q1 2016. It covers people who identified this sector as their **primary** source of income in the week preceding the survey.

Sources: [Farm Structures Survey 2013](#); [CSO QNHS, Q1 2016](#)

Figure 1 Source: Department of Agriculture June 2016

This table from the Department of Agriculture and the CSO provide a breakdown of the numbers of people working in the agri food sector. One of the most significant figures is that the numbers of farm holders younger than 35 is 5.9% versus 52.7% who are over 55. A major contributing factor to this has been the Celtic Tiger era in Ireland and the subsequent recession. This period of massive growth in the Irish economy fuelled by property development has resulted in a generation of young farmers being lost to construction and other sectors who at least temporarily provided a better living.

The abolition of milk quotas on the 1st of April 2015 has been the most fundamental change in the Irish dairy industry in a generation. Under the *Food Harvest 2020 Report* milk production will increase by 50% from the 2008/2009 level. There will be approximately 16,500 dairy farms milking an extra 330,000 cows bringing the number of dairy cows to 1.395 million by 2020. These dairy farms will increase cow numbers by 25 to an average of 85 and produce 450,000 litres extra per year.

The table 1 below shows the effect of increasing herd size on both the average annual and seasonal spring workload requirements on dairy farms. Average herd size has increased from 25 cows per farm in 1990 to 74 cows in 2015. This would correspond to a 3-fold increase in labour requirement during the same period. The increased operational workload during expansion and the need for excellent technical performance places an added management burden on increasingly busy farmers. At the same time, the marginal profitability of milk production and free cash availability are limited during the initial expansion years.

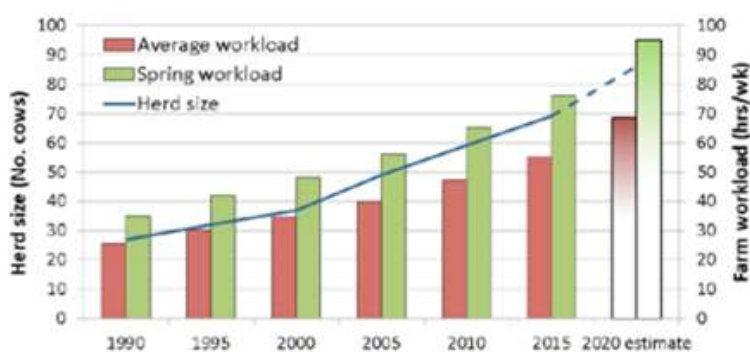


Table 1 (Source: Teagasc Moorepark Open day 2015)

As Irish farms continue to grow, so does the need for talented employees. Dairy farmers need to spend more time managing (planning, monitoring, evaluating and adjusting) their farm businesses in this new environment. Irrespective of the planned level of farm expansion, dairy farms will need additional external labour to cope with the extra workload. Therefore, good people management practices are critical to lifting the productivity and for adding value to the dairy industry (Teagasc 2015).

A lot of work has been undertaken by all stakeholders in the dairy industry to prepare farmers for this new era without milk quota. Many of the positives, negatives and opportunities of this new era have been well flagged. But the labour requirements and managing of same have not been dealt with. There has been little focus on people at the majority of farm walks, open

days and conferences that have taken place around the country over the recent years. Now one year after quota abolition some farmers in expansion mode are finding that attracting and retaining staff is a big challenge. If this issue is not dealt with swiftly and effectively, farmers will burn out trying to achieve the targets of *Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025* reports. The industry must realise that it has to invest in people and realise that this is a long-term project.

“It takes two years to build a farm, it takes ten years to build the capacity in a person to run that farm” – (Interview -Stuart Taylor NZ)

Countries Visited

As part of the Contemporary Scholars Conference and Brazil GFP the author visited France, United Kingdom, Washington DC, California, Mexico, Brazil and New Zealand. Regardless of country, industry or business, those who made developing people a core of their business, had strong, sustainable and profitable businesses.

For his personal study the author visited New Zealand, Australia and Denmark, meeting with farmers, farm consultants and industry leaders the length and breadth of each country. New Zealand was the main focus. Both countries have similar natural resources, average soils, regular rainfall, sunshine and temperate climate. In dairying, the focus is predominantly on spring milk production from grass, resulting in a seasonal requirement for staff. The New Zealand dairy industry has experienced rapid growth, going from an average of 150 – 200 cows in the 1990's to an average of 450 cows now.

Myths around agricultural work

Perception

Young Irish people because of their education have many career opportunities at home and abroad. Agriculture is not among the most desired professions because the perception amongst many outside of agriculture is that work on farms consists of physically demanding tasks, working long hours and for very little pay. It is hard to disagree. Long hours are worn

like a badge of honour by many farmers. Realistically, this is down to the people in charge. They tend to be poorly organised, operating bad systems, and dreadful time managers (Nuthal, 2009).

If we are serious about tackling the impending labour shortages in Irish agriculture, then all the stakeholders need to work together to correct this perception.

We are world class at producing quality milk, why would we not want to be world class employers and provide world class work places?

Are Farmers bad employers?

Another harmful perception is that farmers make bad employers. From the author's travels this myth is well and truly unfounded. Farmers throughout the world, when provided with the training and the tools to manage people, in-fact have the potential to be some of the best employers. One example to prove this point is 15 years ago Irish farmers were poor grassland managers in comparisons to other pasture based farmers worldwide. Over the years Teagasc has sourced and adopted some of the more commonly used tools and techniques worldwide to manage grass, then shared these with Irish farmers through discussion groups and open days. Today some of the world's leading grassland managers are Irish, proving, that when given the means, Irish farmers can adapt to change.

As farmers we need to challenge these myths. Farm owners and managers need to portray a better image if they are to attract some of the best and brightest people. Agriculture should be a job all young people aspire to, and needs to be seen as an exciting career. In a recent UK study, farming topped the poll as the proudest profession. 81% of the agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining and quarrying sector said they were 'proud or very proud' of their industry (Irish Farmers Journal, 2016).

Attracting people

Characteristics of good employers

A question frequently asked by the author during interviews was; what characteristics do good employers possess? The same answers kept coming up. They need to be;

- Capable of leading from the front (good leaders do not sit in offices all day)

- True to their word
- Respected and respectful
- Motivated and capable
- Good communicators (ability to communicate clearly and directly)
- Value people over money
- Have the courage to confront and say no when required

“Learn to trust people, give them the right tools and the mandate” – (Interview-Arthur Bryan NZ)

Farm System

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication” – Leonardo Da Vinci

Before contemplating recruiting additional labour, the farm system currently in operation needs to be examined. A detailed analysis of the working day needs to be under-taken to see where extra labour can add value to the business. With the help of an advisor or consultant, farmers will come to a number of conclusions, these could be;

- Can the business work with current labour but with some additional capital expenditure e.g. bigger milking parlour?
- Is there an opportunity to use well recognised labour saving options such as once a day milking, contract rearing heifers?
- Can some of the current workload be done by contractor e.g. fertiliser and slurry spreading?
- Does it make economic sense to recruit an employee or is there a need to fundamentally change the farm system?

This exercise needs to be undertaken for a farmer to be able to define clearly what the additional labour requirements of the business will be.

“When you have a simple replicable system with an ability to manage people you naturally want to grow the business” – (Interview-Stuart Taylor NZ)

Developing a vision for your farm

“Humans can work to build a future only if they can imagine it first” – (Interview-Tony Dowman NZ)

What is a vision?

A vision is a high level or overarching statement that describes what you want your life or business to be like and the principles or values that guide your efforts and help you to achieve your goals. It should cover 3 main areas; what's important to you, what you want to achieve both personally and professionally and what type of person you want to be.

Farmers need a clear and concise vision for their business. Without this, it is very difficult to get buy-in from prospective staff. This vision is needed to entrench the philosophy in staff.

The author believes farmers do have a vision for their farm, but it needs to be written down and available for staff to read it. To help farmers get absolute clarity when writing down their vision, there are a number of tools available online to help. Both DairyNZ and the CAHRC have a workbook and a planning wheel tool to support their farmers through the steps involved. This facility would be of great benefit to Irish farmers in developing a vision and a plan for their farms.

Case Study – Colin Armour, CEO Armour Group and Shareholder Dairy Holdings Ltd

During the interview, Colin said he always had an ambition to grow his business, but he had very high standards and he strived for perfection around management. His herd was in the top 1% BW (Breeding Worth) in the country. As he began to grow, he struggled to meet his high standards and Colin was forced to change his approach. The farm system was simplified; he changed his approach to labour and built a culture of ownership within the business. This culture of ownership did not mean staff physically owning the business but staff felt a part of the business by being empowered to make decisions themselves.

Colin has seven non-negotiables on all his farms which staff clearly understands. These are non-negotiables because Colin recognises that these underpin the profitability of each farm under his system. These non-negotiables are;

- No supplement
- Set fertilizer usage
- Grazing residuals
- Stocking rate
- Calving date

- Agreed budgets
- Milk price

Colin believes that the best way to manage staff is to *“judge on outcome not on the process”*. This is easier said than done, but staff can surprise by using a different process while still achieving the same results.

In Colin’s experience, all too often farm managers are handed down the yearly budget by the farm owners. Budgets, Colin believes need to come from the manager up, built from scratch, without using previous year’s figures or with no industry costings quoted. This leads to a common approach and better teamwork during the season when managers struggle to meet budget targets.

Key characteristics Colin looks for in potential staff for the Armour Group are that employees need the ability to work as part of a team or organization, they need to be trustworthy and ideally cannot drive a tractor! Colin wants his staff to be fully focused on grass and cows, which drives profit on his farm, and not on machinery which are a distraction.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)

A standard operating procedure, or SOP, is a series of practices and procedures that are drawn up to help employees in their regular duties. It is established to ensure that an organisation is more productive and efficient.

On most farms operated as one person units or family farms, the process involved in completing daily tasks such as turning on the milking machine to treating sick animals have over time become entrenched in memory. It is very rare that a farmer will have a step by step guide available with the details of every process outlined. Having an SOP completed for a farm, helps greatly with communication between staff. One of the drawbacks of SOPs is they are time consuming to formulate at the start. For this reason many farmers will not complete SOPs. Industry has a part to play in helping farmers to adopt definite and clear working systems.

As an example, during the author’s time in New Zealand, chemical companies have a template for milk plant washing available for farmers. With this template a farmer can fill in the farm specific information such as water temperature, volume of detergent and day of the week for descaling the milking machine to complete the SOP.

Other examples include Vets providing farmers with SOPs for treating sick animals or administering vaccines and medication.

Use technology to develop a farm's SOPs

In today's world, technology has the ability to make communication much easier and simpler and this can make farm work more efficient and productive. Smart phones in particular have a role to play. The majority of businesses visited used it in numerous ways such as;

- GoPro videos to explain processes
- Photos on smart phone to explain jobs to staff, but also to record health and safety issues on farms
- Using cloud based programs such as OneNote to share and always have available to staff farm maps, budgets, task lists
- Using cloud based programs to record important events on farm such as calving's, heats etc.
- Use group messaging apps to keep everyone up to date and in the loop with what's happening on farm

Communicating with a multi-lingual team

Communication between team members on farm is one of the most important places where the battle is won or lost. Clear communication leaves no grey areas. Communication can be difficult for many leaders when everyone speaks the same language, but it is an added challenge when some staff have a different native language. All employees need to have a basic knowledge of the working language on the farm.

Case Study - Ben Haslett, Woolenook Fruits, South Australia

This case study offers an example of good farm and people management. Ben Haslett manages his family business growing, packing and marketing citrus, almonds, wine grapes and stone fruit for both domestic and export markets on approximately 100 ha. Additionally, they contract pack and market citrus for other growers and run a contract mechanical almond harvesting service. Because of their location in South Australia, and the seasonality of the

business, their workforce consists largely of backpackers. Not alone have these people a wide range of skills, but they usually come with a variety of native languages. Clear communication is vital, and Ben discovered a novel solution.

A picture paints a thousand words, and this forms the basis of Ben's solution. He has videos made of key processes on his farm. These are all available on computer, and shortly on their smart phone for all staff to watch. He uses a GoPro to capture the video as he works through the process involved in the different jobs. For Ben this is a most effective way of communicating what is required to complete each job.

Understanding the role to be filled

Farmers need to understand the role that needs to be filled from the start, enabling certain skill sets to be targeted and to set clear expectations of the new staff member, therefore, resulting in a clear plan with no grey areas going forward.

To understand what type of team member a farmer requires, he/she needs to ask themselves a number of questions.

- What will be their responsibilities?
- What areas of the business will they be in charge of?
- How long will their working day be?
- Do I need more than one person?
- Time off and who will fill in on days off?

Creating Culture

Before embarking on this scholarship the author understood culture was to do with Irish music and dancing and certainly not to do with farming. It was the most used buzz word during his travels. It is not new, and it is, very much appropriate. Farms already have a culture as does every other human institution. What employers need to do is, work out is it the right culture they want going forward?

"Creating a culture on the farm of honesty, Integrity, respect and trust leads to Passion, Pride, Production and Profit" (Interview-Trevor Hamilton NZ)

What is Culture and is it really necessary?

Culture is the working atmosphere of the farm. Culture can be defined as an evolving set of collective beliefs, values and attitudes. The author believes it can be described as our default setting. It is how we act and react under pressure.

A farm where everyone works as a team will generally be highly successful with great business results along with competent and motivated staff and low staff turnover. The culture on a farm can greatly facilitate this. Cultures need to be changed or adopted in order for a team to become more productive and help individual employees to work as a team.

How to create a culture on farm

“Culture on farm is created by the leadership” – (Interview-Brendon Stent, Landcorp’s farm business manager, Canterbury NZ)

A culture on farm is created by its leader. It can be developed in a series of ways including;

- A clear vision and strategy
- Clear and continuous communication, regular meetings, one to one discussions
- Clear business goals and discussing them with the team
- Setting clear expectations about roles, responsibilities and behaviour
- Increasing the involvement of the staff in decision making
- Showing trust by delegating responsibility

There are different leadership styles. A farmer must know the best one to select in order to foster a culture where people can be both productive and work as part of a team.

Farm Image

First impressions do count. What will a potential employee see when they turn in the entrance to the farm and drive towards the farmyard. As an employee makes this journey he or she is asking themselves "is this a place where I would be happy to work in?". Farmers need to make the effort to have the yard clean and tidy and make the farm attractive and stand out from other farms or farmers.

What farmers require from the Industry

“Farming is no fun without good people” – (Interview-Stuart Taylor NZ)

“If you want to get ahead you need to have people working for you”- (Interview-Matt Pepper NZ)

The author noted with interest that the *Food Harvest 2020* report runs to 60 pages long, yet only one paragraph was set aside to deal with the labour required to have these increases in production followed through. It seems highly unlikely that without the appropriate labour that this is achievable. We need all the relevant stakeholders to come together and work on drawing up a strategy to ensure Irish agriculture can attract and retain the best and the brightest people, while providing quality work environments to drive our industry forward.

For farmers who have never employed someone in the past it can be a daunting task. It takes a mind-set change and it adds new responsibilities. They will need to be leaders and learn how to form a team and set objectives and goals. For many it is too big a venture into the unknown to take. Farmers need to educate themselves and change practices. They need to have a good understanding of employment law and ensure that they are conforming to all the existing legislation. Farmers must have an understanding of how to practically manage people, and this report will go a long way in doing this. They will need to be able to develop strategies that will allow them to utilise their resources and staff in ways that allow them to meet their objectives such as increased production or productivity. This view was expressed during the interview with Colin Glass, CEO of Dairy Holdings Ltd in New Zealand.

“People skills are self-thought, it is like osmosis” = (Interview-Colin Glass)

“We think we milk cows, no we actually manage people” – (Interview-Colin Glass)

Agricultural workers are covered by the Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for the Agriculture sector. In 2011 the high court ruled that certain provisions of the Industrial Relations Acts of 1946 and 1990 governing the making of Employment Regulation Orders were unconstitutional. In October 2013 a report published of the Labour Court’s review of the Joint Labour Committee system, recommended in relation to the agriculture sector, was that the JLC be retained for that sector with reduced scope.

The JLC system provides a framework within which employers and employee representatives can come together voluntarily and negotiate terms and conditions of workers in their respective sectors. For vulnerable workers, the advantage of JLCs is that they see fair terms and conditions such as wage rates, sick pay etc. agreed and given effect by Employment Regulation Orders. For other employers, the advantage of the JLC system, based as it is on the principle of self-governance, means that they can agree and set minimum pay and conditions, agree on work practices which are custom-made to their industry – a flexibility which cannot be achieved by primary legislation. Where both parties to a JLC see commonality of purpose and outcome then an agreement may emerge (*source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2015-05-19a.442>*). Farmers need a fair outcome for everyone involved at this JLC. The farm organisations have a responsibility to get involved and make a submission on farmer's behalf and ensure farmer's voices are heard. It is also open to individuals to make a submission, which would allow Nuffield Scholars to have a say. Irish farmers now require programmes to educate them in the areas of employment law and managing and motivating people. Teagasc needs to improve their focus on people. This will enable Irish farmers to understand how best to influence the behaviour of their employees so that they are able to achieve the required goals and targets. Open days and discussion groups are the best way to disperse this information to the farming community and they are already focused on sharing knowledge. These meetings need to focus on the labour dimension of each farm that's being visited, how it is being managed, the techniques that work well or the techniques that do not.

“Managing people is a specialist task. You wouldn't be a vet without any training and, sadly, when it comes to people we need to be more professional and invest in our human resource skills.” – (DairyNZ website, 2016)

Farmers require a central online resource where all relevant information can be easily accessed. DairyNZ as an example have an informative website with a large volume of information which can be downloaded under the 'people' tab. This website is an important resource and farmers at any time of the day or night can refer to this website whenever they have a query, need clarification or want to bring about change within his/her team.

In New Zealand, Federated Farmers and DairyNZ collaborate together in a range of staff related areas. Both organisations have joint employment contracts which farmers can easily download and use on their own farms.

There is an opportunity here for the relevant stake holders especially the Irish Farmers Association and Teagasc to come together and provide similar resources for Irish farmers. Farmers require specimen agreements, outlining the terms and conditions of employment, which they can use on their own farms.

Recruiting good people

The process of recruiting someone to work as part of a business can be for many, a daunting task. It tends to be left to the last minute and rushed decisions or judgements will be made. The people selected may not be correct for the job required. However, with the right intentions and a systematic approach to hiring this need not be the case. Jim Collins in his book 'Good to Great' advises 'Hire slow, fire fast' (2001; p56). This view was repeated in the interviews.

"New Zealanders run their farms with just enough staff. When things go wrong they get desperate and desperate farmers make desperate decisions and end up employing desperate people. Then the law protects the employee" – (Interview-Stuart Taylor NZ)

What employees are looking for

Employees are attracted to working with good people and good businesses with a good reputation. Reputation was singled out by many of the interviewees the author visited as the single most important attribute potential employees look for. Therefore, it is imperative that any decision made, any action taken will not affect the long term reputation of the farm and its leader. Matt Pepper, a North Island dairy farmer from New Zealand, stated during the interview 'it takes a lifetime to build a reputation, it takes 5 minutes to destroy it'

"Reputation is what makes the difference when it comes to getting the best staff and the best share-milking jobs" – (Interview-Matt Pepper NZ)

One of the challenges faced on many farms are that different generations have different goals and expectations from work. Today's generation 'work to live' rather than the 'live to work'

ethos of the previous generation. This has to be respected by both generations rather than one trying to change the other to their way of thinking.

Today staff want flexibility; they want routine, rostered time off with a fair and competitive remuneration. They want to be treated with respect, they want to learn, be part of something bigger all within a positive and progressive atmosphere. These are all fair and reasonable expectations in today's world. The author believes agriculture can provide all these, if there is a willingness by farmers and the industry to take on board new thinking.

Some of the reasons staff leave identified in the study were as follows;

- No career growth
- Low salary
- Poor communication
- Meaningless projects
- No recognition

Characteristics of good employees

Attitude is regarded as the number one characteristic of good employees by all interviewees throughout this scholarship. If the employee has the right attitude, a willingness to learn, to try new methods coupled with good communication skills, all other necessary skills to successfully complete the job can be taught.

"Look for attitude in people, skills can be taught" – (Interview-Tony Dowman NZ)

At industry level it is common for businesses to use psychometric testing to establish if a person is the right fit for the company. On the authors travels he did not come across any farmer specifically using this tool but Aoife Lyons, Alltech gives a very good presentation on the benefits of psychometric testing on a YouTube video. (Taking the guesswork out of hiring – Aoife Lyons-Alltech <https://youtu.be/BlgvDQOhVUY>)

Interviews

Interviews are relatively subjective but are widely accepted to be an important step in the recruitment of staff. Interviews should contain a formal element indoors around a table but why not take a walk around the farm if the person is creating a good impression. This is a good way to get to know them and find out how much experience the interviewee has along with

establishing how much farming knowledge they possess. Asking a few current affair questions can tell a lot about a person. If the interviewee shows an interest in what's going on outside their shell, this shows they are thinking about what is happening in the wider world and thinking about their own future.

“People don't ask enough hard questions in interviews” – (Interview-Matt Pepper NZ)

Questions to be asked should include;

- Previous experience
- Strengths and weaknesses
- What their personal and business goals are and how they feel this job fits in with these
- What do they want to get from this job?
- Where do they see themselves in three, five or ten years?

What is important is to understand clearly from the candidate, what they are working towards. What do they hope to achieve both personally and professionally over the short, medium and long term? When an employer has a clear grasp of the interviewee's goals then it is easier to establish if the interviewee is the right 'fit for' the position available. Knowing your staff's goal is a powerful motivational tool. When an employer knows an employee's goals he can link getting work done with achieving the employee's goals.

Ask staff “what do you want, where do you see yourself and your family” – (Interview-Jim Van Der Poel NZ).

A part often overlooked by many during an interview, is that it provides the opportunity to clearly explain the position available. It is a good time to explain the culture of the business, the vision, and what is expected from a new team member.

“At an interview explain clearly to the interviewee the job expectation. Leave them in no doubt of what's expected and the goals that need to be achieved” = (Interview-Arthur Bryan NZ).

References

All potential staff should be able to provide at least three references and these should be checked by contacting the referees.

“Reference checks are most important when employing staff” – (Interview-Colin Glass NZ).

What does empowering staff mean

Empowering staff is a management practice of sharing information, rewards, and power with employees so that they can take initiative and make decisions to solve problems and improve service and performance.

Empowerment is based on the idea that giving employees skills, resources, authority, opportunity, motivation, as well as holding them responsible and accountable for the outcomes of their actions, will contribute to their competence and satisfaction.

(Source: www.businessdictionary.com/definition/empowerment.html#ixzz48fUKmA1b)

For farmers who have built up a strong business over many years, it can be difficult to change the current mind-set to one of sharing power and giving responsibility to others. It is a skill that will come about only with time when a relationship of trust has developed between the farmer and employee.

Remuneration

“Give opportunities not money”- (Interview-Trevor Hamilton NZ).

Remuneration or pay can always be a problematic issue. Employers want to pay as little as possible, employees want as much as possible. It is the nature of the beast. Average annual earnings according to the CSO in 2014 were €35,768 for a 35.2 hour working week. Many farmers believe that good people leave because of money. It is an important factor in attracting good staff, but it certainly is not the only factor. During the author’s travels the common answer to this question was pay on or slightly above the going rate.

“Paying top dollar doesn’t automatically attract skilled people who are committed to helping you reach your farm business objectives – (Lynn Perry, Integrity Human Resources Services, Canada)

“More money only motivates for a short period” – (Interview-Katie Flett, NZ).

The author had expected bonus structures to be a common feature on many farms, but it was not. In fact it was quite the opposite. On farms where bonuses were used to achieve better results or greater efficiency it tended to be focused in areas such as;

- Chronic problems

- Achieving key performance targets that would have a significant knock on effect on farm profitability
- Innovative or new ideas

Bonuses to begin with seem a sensible strategy to keep staff focused. But in fact they have the potential to cause quite a lot of tension as they become expected and anticipated by staff. Bonuses also increase the administration burden on the employer and especially at busy periods of the year such as calving and breeding.

Case Study – Michael Craig Tuloona Pastoral, Victoria, Australia 2015 Nuffield Scholar

Michael is General Manager of Tuloona Pastoral, a mixed broad acre livestock and cropping enterprise consisting of 18,000 sheep, 500 cows and a 1400 ha cropping program. With high production costs, a tough environment and small population, Australian sheep producers have a challenge to be profitable.

Michael explained that there are three levels of people required on a farm. It is important he feels to refer to these as levels rather than putting a monetary value on each of them, as automatically one level appears to be worth more than the other. Michael says "the key profit drivers are in the level 2 and level 3 decisions, but if we do not have a strong level one as a foundation it gets eroded very quickly. The key challenge of effective management is both being aware of the levels and importantly establishing the best fit for people to maximize both their own worth, and the value they can create for the business". The levels are;

- Level 1 – Day to day operations
- Level 2 – Pasture management, planning 6-9 months ahead
- Level 3 – Big picture, strategic planning, deciding which animal breeds to use etc.

Fertility and mortality in his sheep flock have a huge effect on farm profitability. Michael's farm manager gets 50% of the financial benefit of each of these if he improves on them each year.

During the authors visit Michael spoke very highly of his farm manager. His biggest fear, is that of losing his manager.

“I can’t reward my manager with money, I reward him with respect” (Interview, Michael Craig, Victoria).

Another quote which stood out from the visit was;

“Put dollar figures on losses/mistakes, this takes the emotional factor out of it” (interview, Michael Craig, Victoria).

Health and Safety

The statistics are alarming, between 2014 and 2015, 47 men, women and children died on Irish farms. Health and safety always needs to be at the forefront of farmer's minds. The pain and hurt this issue has caused to families both in Ireland and abroad is phenomenal. Accidents are caused by many factors, but one common area is people operating unfamiliar machinery. The consequences of any accident with staff suddenly affect more than just the employer’s family.

Some simple steps to ensure the farm is safe from hazards;

- Identify the hazards on your farm
- Step back and review the risk they present
- Reduce the overall risk to staff, contractors and visitors by making changes
- Monitor and review

During the author’s travels, health and safety on farms in New Zealand and Australia were the central focus point.

“Record all near misses, minor injuries, accidents on farm. This provides opportunity to train staff so more serious accidents are avoided” (Interview, Tony Dowman NZ)

Staff have to be provided with the necessary PPE to carry out the job on hand. This safety equipment needs to be checked regularly to ensure it is in good working order. Never put staff in a dangerous position or in a position you would not feel comfortable in yourself. It is the responsibility of the farmer to see that health and safety legislation is implemented and that all the employees are trained to minimize hazards on the farm. He or she should establish a health and safety culture, where all employees seek to work together to manage risk on the farm.

Retaining good people

“Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don’t want to” – Sir Richard Branson

The ability to retain staff is one of the most underrated attributes of many successful businesses. Retaining quality people is about ensuring good employees stay in your business because they have interesting and rewarding jobs.

The loss of good staff directly affects the profitability of a business. When they move the business is hit with costs such as the cost of recruitment, training, time etc., as well as the much bigger indirect costs of mistakes, loss of experience, loss of farm specific knowledge, loss of team morale etc. In New Zealand the average period of tenure by farm staff is 1.6 years. This is a staggering statistic. 23% of their labour force is made up by immigrant labour (DairyNZ, 2014).

In reality, staff turnover is inevitable. It would be naive of a farmer to think that once recruited an employee is there for life. Many studies have been carried out on what the millennial generation of today want from a workplace. One of the observations is they like to change jobs a number of times during their working life. Farmers should not be afraid of this. This will be particularly true on farms with one employee. The ladder of progression an employee yearns for may not be available and they will naturally move on to the next opportunity. The farm systems needs to be able to cope with this change.

During the author’s travels, some farmers with limited experience in recruiting people believed if they selected a person not suitable for the position available, it was simply a case of ‘finding someone else’. Research from the industry would show that this is not the case. Aoife Lyons, Director of Global Educational Initiatives in Alltech says it costs double a person’s salary to replace someone. Therefore, a farm manager getting €30,000 could potentially cost up to €60,000 to replace. But why and what are the hidden costs;

- Time for your existing employees to cover work in the interim
- Time and money to find a replacement
- Time and money to train the replacement
- Loss of knowledge

- Stress and strain on the existing team

Jim Van Der Poel a 2002 NZ Nuffield Scholar had the following key points to retaining good staff;

- Be clear on expectations
- Treat with respect
- Have a ladder for progression
- Mentor them and grow them
- Your only job is to make them better farmers

Case Study – Stuart Taylor OB Group New Zealand

“Managing people is 90% about managing yourself”

Stuart Taylor is the General Manager for the O’Brien Group of farms in the Rangitikei Region (4,500 cows). It is not traditional dairying country. The land has been converted from forestry. With the soil being mostly sand; clovers and tall fescues are grown predominantly under irrigation. He is also the director for several dairy-based organisations in Southland and Northland.

It is fair to say meeting Stuart was one of the highlights of the Scholarship. He has a people centric philosophy focusing on growing and developing people.

All staff on the farm are on an hourly rate. Employees have an app on their phone to easily record and monitor the hours each one works. Managers and assistant managers are on a salary targeting 2800 hours per year or 58 hours per week. All the other staff are paid an hourly rate with a minimum working week of 45 hours to a max of 55 hours worked per week. This means on their 1000 cow herds, 6-7 people are employed. Having extra hands available makes the farm able to cope with intense periods of activity and still allowing staff great flexibility. Stuart has the economics clearly calculated and it works out exactly the same at the end of the day but it means the guys are in control of their day.

Staff on the farm are rewarded only for innovative and new ideas. This is what drives Stuart’s business. Stuart believes it is important to make sure employees understand what is being asked of them to complete tasks *“Don’t challenge staff; ask questions to make sure they*

understand". Stuart says it is critical to build a system that suits the management style of the leader of the farm.

"Equity growth is inevitable when you grow good people" (Interview, Stuart Taylor)

Stuart strongly believes in twice yearly staff reviews. Staff review the manager and the manager review the staff. It gives everyone in the team the chance to have their say and to be heard.

"When you have a simple replicable system with an ability to manage people you naturally want to grow the business" (Interview, Stuart Taylor)

Communication

Understanding people

It is quite frustrating when working with people on the farm and not getting the results that you expected. As stated earlier in this report, expectations need to be crystal clear to employees but not withstanding this, problems can occur when jobs are not carried out to a satisfactory standard and directions have been misinterpreted.

This can lead to goals and objectives not being met. This is often a result of employers simply expecting that everyone knows as much about the job on hand as they do and they poorly communicate the basic details of the task requirements. It is well summed up by the following quote;

"Someone's world view depends on what they have experienced"- (Interview, Ben Allomes 2015 Nuffield Scholar NZ)

This is particularly relevant to farmers and farming. The author previously, when dealing with people, was afraid to make a conversation too basic, based on the assumption 'sure they come from a farm, sure they must know'. This opinion is detrimental to successfully teaching and upskilling staff. It is important to always be conscious of this when communicating with people.

Listening is a vital part of communication. Employers need to listen to understand, not just listen to respond. There is a difference. Many people listen but are also processing the answer and usually miss the key point of the person speaking. The culture of a farm needs to be one where people are encouraged to communicate.

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood” – Stephen Covey

Remember, if an employee fails or makes a mistake it is your fault. Either the employee was mistrained or the communication was not clear.

Ongoing Training

Further training is about increasing the skill level of your staff which will have a positive benefit on your business. By training your staff it shows them that they are a valued part of the business.

“Farmers invest \$90,000 in a tractor and spend \$5000 - \$10000 a year maintaining that tractor. Farmers spend \$90,000 a year on their key manager and spend nothing on training/maintaining the asset – then wonders why it breaks” – (Interview, Stuart Taylor NZ)

In New Zealand there are courses available to train and up skill staff in a range of relevant areas to work in a successful dairy farm through Primary ITO. The courses teach the knowledge, skills and initiative required to boost productivity and in turn add to the overall profitability of the farm. They can take the format of short courses, certificate or diploma programs along with online training modules.

Ireland needs recognised courses similar to what Primary ITO offer. They need to be accredited and recognised. They ideally would be provided by Teagasc who have the knowledge and expertise.

“It is cheaper to invest than to replace staff” – (Lynn Perry, Human Resource Consultant, Canada)

Not all training needs to be done by outside providers. The farmer has built up his or her own skill set from their own experience. Make time on a weekly basis to share this knowledge with an employee. Give them assignments on farm to complete and work through their results with them. One such example is to let them complete a grass measuring farm walk and compile this information into generating a feed wedge afterwards. Ask the employee how they interpret the figures and what grassland management decisions they would make for the week ahead. On farm practical training is a very useful tool to further develop an employee's knowledge and skill set.

Team Reviews

People Management Consultants

“When a complete stranger walks into any business, staff will spill their guts” – (Interview, Colin Glass NZ)

Businesses struggling to get to grips with their work force issues, employ people management consultants to understand where the problem lies in an organisation.

From the authors travels a number of farms, employed People Management Consultants. The consultant will meet with all parties involved on farm; from general farm workers to owners. There are a number of approaches that can be taken. Some will meet with all the team members individually and complete staff appraisals. More visits can take the format of a farm walk with everyone involved and issues arising dealt with as the walk progresses.

After meeting on farm, a report is sent to everyone of the outcomes of the day along with a list of tasks/instructions for each person including owners. It acts as a legal document and it is important to have a paper trail of under-performing staff.

Consultants to be effective need to be direct and slightly abrasive and their feedback needs to be integrated into the goals of the farm business.

There is an opportunity here for Teagasc advisors and private farm consultants to fill this space. With the relevant training, these advisors can provide farmers with the necessary help to deal with whatever staffing issues they may have.

Exit Interviews

If an animal dies on farm, the farmer will get a vet to do a postmortem to understand the causes of death. Then from the results try and understand how to protect the rest of the herd from a similar faith. When young stock are not achieving the targeted growth rate farmers will question the grassland management decisions and implement a plan to improve performance.

When an employee leaves, the focus is on recruiting the next person, without fully understanding the reason why the original employee left in the first place. Often times the

reasons are simple, career progression or family circumstances can be the reason. But what about if high staff turnover is an issue. It is practices on farm that are the cause of them leaving. The next employee could leave for the same or similar reasons.

Exit interviews provide an opportunity to understand the reasons behind a staff member leaving and gives a farmer the opportunity to make changes before the new employee begins.

Dealing with Poor Performance

When employees are consistently underperforming or incompetent it is better to remove them immediately. These 'bad eggs' will have a negative impact on the culture and on staff moral. Always be aware of an employer's responsibilities and employees rights when deciding to let someone go. It is a business and a farmer needs a workforce that is disciplined and productive. However, some forms of poor performance can be a result of extenuating circumstances. A farmer will need to know when an employee needs support to help them improve their performance and when that employee needs to be dismissed. This requires leadership and managerial skills.

Conclusions

Technical ability and hard work will not be enough going forward to manage the modern farm. Good people management skills and leadership will be key.

Irish farmers have the ability to be the employers-of-choice for many, by providing the best working environments. This is dependent on whether they can get the training and education to develop their people management skills. In this way they can provide the leadership and the management skills that are needed to make farming more attractive to young people.

Clear, concise and continuous communication is key to successful management and achieving 'Buy in' from an employee. Farmers need to have a vision; they need to know what type of culture they want to create on their farm. Farmers need to understand their business goals to ensure they hire the right employees. Farmers need to set out work expectations, provide timely feedback and performance reviews and say 'please and thank you'. This is essential if the industry is to take advantage of opportunities in the sector in the coming years.

Employers are required to look after employee's health and safety on farm. Keep them safe from hazards, provide the necessary personal protective equipment and watch out for their mental health.

Today's generation is much more interested in a work-life balance than previous generations and expect good terms of employment. Therefore, working hours, time off, rosters, and remuneration are all very important to today's work force in agriculture.

Employers need to protect their reputation to safeguard their business.

Look for attitude and honesty in employees, all other skills can be taught.

The ability to retain staff is one of the most underrated attributes of businesses. The cost of replacing staff can be up to twice their salary.

Staff are an investment in the business not a cost. Constantly train and upskill employees. It shows them they are valued but it also has a positive financial benefit to the farm.

The research indicates that farmers need to manage their employees better, and if they do so, then their farms will be more productive and profitable.

Recommendations

1. View staff as an investment not as a cost to the business. For any business to successfully grow, people need to be the number one goal. Employers must stop giving lip service to the importance of employees within their business and put their words into actions.
2. The IFA and Teagasc should draw up specimen contract agreements, outlining the terms and conditions of employment, which farmers can use on their own farms.
3. Farmers and employees need to be represented at the Joint Labour Committee for the Agriculture sector. The IFA is well positioned to do this. The JLC system provides a framework within which employers and employee representatives can come together voluntarily and negotiate terms and conditions of workers in their respective sector. Pay rates, working hours and time off all need to be discussed openly and included in these discussions.
4. Teagasc needs to improve their focus on people. Teach and show farmers best practice through open days and discussion groups.
5. Teagasc should provide a course in good practice in Human Resources so that employers can up skill.
6. As part of their in-service training days, Teagasc advisors need to be trained to identify staff issues, to critically examine employers own people management skills on farms and how to provide advice to both employers and employees to resolve any issues that may arise.
7. Farmers require an accessible online resource where all relevant tools and information to help them attract, retain, manage, and motivate staff are provided.
8. Vets, suppliers and manufacturers need to work with farmers and provide them with Standard Operating Procedures relevant to their products or equipment.
9. Embrace technology. Platforms such as cloud based programs are an innovative way to share farm information such as farm maps and livestock data between a farm team. Use a group messaging app to keep everyone on farm up-to-date with what is happening on farm.

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www.realagriculture.com/tag/lynn-perry/

Appendix

Employer Checklist

Characteristics of good employers

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Am I capable of leading from the front?		
Am I true to my word?		
Am I respected and respectful?		
Am I motivated and capable?		
Can I communicate clearly and directly?		
Am I a good listener?		
Do I value people over money?		
Am I willing to teach an employee and mentor them?		
Have I courage to confront and say no when required?		
Am I willing to give responsibility?		
Have I a written down vision for my business?		
Do I know what type of culture I want to create on farm?		

Farm System

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR MY FARM</u>
Can the business work with current labour but with some additional capital expenditure e.g. bigger milking parlour?			

Is there an opportunity to use well recognised labour saving options such as once a day milking, contract rearing heifers?			
Can some of the current workload be done by contractor e.g. fertiliser and slurry spreading?			
Does it make economic sense to recruit an employee or is there a need to fundamentally change the farm system?			

Recruiting the correct employee

	<u>Answer</u>
What will be their responsibilities?	
What areas of the business will they be in charge of?	
How long will their working day be?	
Do I need more than one person?	
What will be their time off and who will fill in on days off?	
What skills does the employee need?	
What level of remuneration have I budgeted for?	
Will I provide a career path?	
Do I know what my expectations of the employee are?	
How can I train and up-skill an employee?	
Have I a "Plan B" if an employee was to leave?	
Have I have a system to complete team reviews?	

Am I aware of the basic legalisation (leave, time sheets etc) of employing?	
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The Farm

	<u>YES</u>	<u>No</u>
Is my farm an attractive place to work?		
Is my farm a safe place to work?		
Have I Standard Operating Procedures available for the different tasks?		
Are there rest facilities on farm (toilet access, eating space etc) for employee?		