



**A Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust
Report**

Award sponsored by

Alan & Anne Beckett



**The journey to building a
fulfilling life and career in farming**

David Hichens

October 2018

NUFFIELD UK

NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS TRUST (UK)

**Awarding life changing Scholarships that unlock individual potential
and broaden horizons through study and travel overseas,
with a view to developing farming and agricultural industries.**

"Leading positive change in agriculture"

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Scholarships are open to those who work in farming, food, horticulture, rural and associated industries or are in a position to influence these industries. You must be a resident in the UK. Applicants must be aged between 22 and 45 years (the upper age limit is 45 on 31st July in the year of application). There is no requirement for academic qualifications, but applicants will already be well established in their career and demonstrate a passion for the industry they work in and be three years post tertiary education. Scholarships are not awarded to anyone in full-time education or to further research projects.

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Closing date for completed applications is the 31st July each year.

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A Nuffield (UK) Farming Scholarships Trust Report



*"Leading positive change in agriculture.
Inspiring passion and potential in people."*

Date of report: October 2018

Title	The journey to building a fulfilling life and career in farming
Scholar	David Hichens
Sponsor	Alan and Anne Beckett
Objectives of Study Tour	<p>To find out how the world's most successful farmers make it look easy.</p> <p>To establish what young people who wish to build a fulfilling life and career in farming can learn from these farmers and businesses</p>
Countries Visited	<p>Brazil</p> <p>Ireland, UK, Denmark</p> <p>Singapore, India, Qatar</p> <p>USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand</p>
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Getting to know yourself and establishing what success means to you takes real investment in time and learning.• Once you have this knowledge, with the guidance of mentors you can make a plan, remembering that success is a journey and not a destination.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this study was to find out what sets the best farmers and farming businesses apart from the rest; and how young people when planning out their own farming journey towards success, can learn from those successful farmers and farming businesses. This comes at a pivotal point in my own career and life, so much of this report is related back to my own story which I feel is quite relevant to a lot of people currently setting out in the UK dairy industry without proper direction or intent. When there seems to be such a huge divide in aspiration, attitude, achievement and culture between those people and businesses that are thriving and those that aren't, we need to make sure we are learning from the right ones.

Firstly, definitions of success are discussed. Having travelled for nearly 6 months including completing the India Global Focus Programme it was discovered that only you can be the judge of your own success in completing what you set out to do. To that end, planning out what you want to achieve before you even start was found to be one of the most integral parts of the process. It is felt that many young people need help to focus on this, as they lack guidance and are faced with sometimes too many options.

The best businesses run by the best people are found to be calmer and more productive and efficient environments due to the leadership shown by those successful people who have a strategic outlook. This is helped greatly by those who make a conscious effort to grasp and manage time, one of the most finite resources within our disposal. Successfully grasping and managing time allows more focus to be put on people within those businesses; and getting both of these right creates a positive cycle. This cycle drives productivity and efficiency, creating a more positive and enjoyable safe working environment.

It has been concluded that people drive success by having the right attitude, outlook and training and that these need to be improved through more active personal development. Young people need to be shown more leadership and guidance through structured mentoring from already established people in our industry. The first step towards knowing what success means to you is knowing yourself; practices like personality testing and self-reflection are a good starting point for this. These should then be discussed with a trusted mentor to help begin formulating a personal plan that maps out your journey to success.

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DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this report are my own and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, or of my sponsor, or of any other sponsoring body.

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1. Personal Introduction and background to study

I was lucky enough to be born into agriculture, growing up on a small family dairy farm on the north coast of West Cornwall between Land's End and St Ives. Like many in this situation, I was farming mad at a young age and worked on farms during all the school holidays.

I hadn't really given my background story much thought until on my Nuffield Farming study tour when I found myself asking successful farmers around the world to tell me their 'story'. Many of them talked about their childhood and upbringing, the values that it had instilled in them and how this had affected their life. Looking back now I had a pretty excellent childhood, being brought up on a farm with plenty of muck and sea air. I also had a set of parents who taught me the value of hard work and persuaded me to try new things and get out in the world. My parents packed me off on the train to my first harvest job on a big arable farm when I was aged 16 to a farmer they'd met randomly when they stayed in a B&B in Oxfordshire while visiting my sister at Uni. This is the sort of character-building experience you never forget and I began to wonder what the big influences and milestones have been in my own life so far which have brought me to writing this Nuffield Farming report.



Figure 1: The author, David Hichens

At age 18 I went on to study agriculture at Harper Adams. It was at this point that I really started to question how farmers ran their businesses and the choices that they made along the way: how do successful farmers who have built good levels of wealth and lifestyle seem to have made it look so easy whilst, for others, farming has been a life sentence of hard work with not much return.

There often doesn't seem to be that much of visible difference between these two camps of farmers. Yes, there are different ways of getting milk from a cow but the grass is usually green and the cows usually black and white. So surely it must be the people who are different? This inquisition persisted during the seven years I spent working as a dairy farm manager for the farm management company Velcourt at the University of Bristol Veterinary School. Despite having a good job that I enjoyed, I've always wanted to farm in my own right – indeed the desire in us dairy farmers to own a herd of cows is quite a strong one. Surely this isn't the same for people who work in IT etc?

It was whilst at Bristol that I was lucky enough to work with both the Alvis family and the late Prof John Alliston all of whom were influential in my applying for a Nuffield Farming Scholarship to travel

the world and talk to farmers about this divide in aspiration, achievement and culture. Having thought for a while about returning home to the family farm, and with my parents approaching retiring age, I decided that having been awarded my Nuffield Farming Scholarship this was the perfect time to leave full time employment and set out on my own farming journey.

This seemed like quite a big leap at the age of 29, not really knowing what was next after my Nuffield Farming Scholarship, whilst all the people around me seemed to have their lives strategically planned out. As it turns out, once I started talking openly to the people around me about my situation, a worrying percentage of 30-year olds aren't content with their careers as well as other aspects of their lives. There are a lot of young people working in our industry in their 20s who lack direction and purpose. They have not had exposure to some of the opportunities that only the best and more forward thinking employers offer. This has prevented them from realising the potential they could reach and many of them leave our industry to follow a different career path because of it.

Whilst travelling for six months of the last year to try and find out how the best and most successful farmers in the world have negotiated the twists and turns of their lives, it has given me time to work on my own plan and how I might execute it. For those young people such as myself who have the opportunity to continue an existing family farming business, negotiating the challenge of succession poses yet another hurdle where they may succeed or fail.

One thing is for sure, we need to learn more from the people who are doing it right. I have come to realise that the way most dairy farms in the UK are run is completely unsustainable in terms of what is expected of people and the pressure that they are put under. Working 12 days on and 2 off with long days, lots going wrong and lots of stress might look efficient in the short term but it's pedalling pretty hard, and how long before the wheels fall off? We all know plenty of dairy farms where there are lots of people running around like headless chickens 'fighting fires', usually with an exhausted team, a very high staff turnover and often running short staffed because they struggle to recruit. We are losing efficiency by working in this way and when the wheels do fall off it can cost a lot of time and money. What's more I don't think it is good for our health nor is it safe.

Hopefully some of the young people who are slightly lost working in these situations might read this report, realise how much more our industry has to offer them and just how much it could help them achieve in their lives. Similarly I think there are lots older people who don't realise they could be doing more to lead these young people for the future.

2. Study tour details

For the personal travel element of my Nuffield Farming Scholarship I chose mainly English-speaking countries as I felt my subject was a very personal and emotional one and that I would struggle to get the full benefit from my visits if they involved broken English or a translator. I also chose some of the world's main dairy regions because of their relevance to my own interests and business, and the area of industry that I want to influence.

A UK Nuffield Farming Scholarship consists of:

- (1) A briefing in London.
- (2) Joining the week-long Contemporary Scholars' Conference attended by all new Nuffield Farming Scholars world wide.
- (3) A personal study tour of approximately 8 weeks looking in detail at the Scholar's chosen topic.
- (4) A Global Focus Tour (optional) where a group of 10 Scholars from a mix of the countries where the scheme operates travel together for 7 weeks acquiring a global perspective of agriculture.

The Nuffield Farming Scholarships scheme originated in the UK in 1947 but has since expanded to operate in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Zimbabwe, France, Ireland, and The Netherlands. Brazil, Chile, South Africa and the USA are in the initial stages of joining the organisation.

That said, taking part in the Global Focus Programme (GFP) was also a huge part of my Nuffield travel, experience and thought processes, travelling for seven weeks with nine other scholars from Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Brazil and the Netherlands. This was an amazing experience, getting to go to countries I would never have gone to, and getting a real global perspective of agriculture, as well as having a like-minded group of people with whom to discuss all the issues we came across. These nine people are now friends for life and the best bit of the GFP was getting to visit some of them during my personal travel. The GFP was also a great platform for 'setting the scene' for my personal Nuffield Farming topic and kick-starting some of the ideas which led to the conclusions drawn later in this report. The 2017 India Global Focus Programme was probably the highlight of my whole Nuffield Farming experience and I hope that Nuffield UK continues to get behind the GFP and that future UK scholars get the opportunity to take full advantage of it.

For details of my study tour please see overleaf.

Study tour details:

When	Where	Comment
March 2017	Brazil Contemporary Scholars' Conference	10 days - Nuffield Contemporary Scholars' Conference and post Conference tour
May 2017	Singapore Global Focus Programme	5 days
May 2017	India (GFP) Global Focus Programme	10 days
May 2017	Qatar (GFP) Global Focus Programme	1 week
May 2017	Denmark (GFP) Global Focus Programme	1 week
June 2017	UK (GFP) Global Focus Programme	10 days - Joined Nuffield International Triennial Conference
June 2017	USA (GFP) Global Focus Programme	10 days - Washington D.C and Iowa
June/July 2017	USA Personal Study Tour	3 weeks - Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Wisconsin
July 2017	Canada Personal Study Tour	10 days - Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta
September 2017	Ireland Personal Study Tour	5 days
Nov/Dec 2017	Australia Personal Study Tour	5 weeks - NSW, SA, VIC, TAS
Jan/Feb 2018	New Zealand Personal Study Tour	8 weeks - North & South Island
February 2018	Australia Personal Study Tour	3 days - Attended Australian Dairy Conference

3. How do we define success?

Success: 1. *'The accomplishment of an aim or purpose', 'a favourable outcome, the accomplishment of what was aimed at; the attainment of wealth, fame or a position'.*

Success: 2. *'a thing or person that turns out well'.*

I think the Oxford dictionary starts out pretty well here in defining success as the accomplishment of an aim or purpose with no restriction as to what that accomplishment or purpose could be; but it then goes on to add the attainment of wealth, fame or position. So why is it that we as humans only ever seem to focus on the latter bit? In farming we often assume that success has to be purely driven by scale or financial success and for some it is, but isn't success just achieving what you set out to do? I'll give you some examples:

New Zealand dairy farmer Colin Armour feels that success has to include scale and profit as these things allow him the freedom in his life that he desires as part of his goals. He and his wife Dale's main business runs to over 13000 cows in the North Island and they are also major shareholders in the South Island-based company Dairy Holdings. The North Island business is run by a general manager – something they can justify with their scale - and Dairy Holdings has a CEO, so only requires attending periodic meetings. This is how scale gives Colin and Dale the freedom that they want and why they would consider that they have been successful.

For Harry Wier, New Zealand beef farmer and Kiwitech fencing inventor, on the other hand, rather than scale of business or money his ultimate goal would be to *'live without illusion'*. Harry cares deeply about the environment: not just locally but the damage we as humans are doing to the planet concerns him. He thinks this is largely driven by our desire for material wealth and considers that a lot of 'successful' farmers have achieved success at the price of the environment. Living without illusion refers to the fact that Harry would rather be fully aware of the damage that we are doing to the planet than be happy through any form of greed or degree of naivety.

My point is that success is in the eye of the beholder and can mean very different things to all of us. I would say it's about figuring out what your outcomes are and then achieving them. However for me, this shouldn't be at the expense of your health, the environment, other people (including family, employees, spouses etc) or - in the case of us dairy farmers - the welfare of our cows. I like the word 'outcomes' rather than 'goals'. A goal to me is something like *'I want 500 cows by the time I'm 40'*, not *why* you want 500 cows or whether it is necessarily a good idea or not. The example goal of 500 cows by age 40 should follow an outcome objective to achieve a certain level of wealth, lifestyle or sense of purpose.

A big part of success is also knowing when you have enough so you don't end up on a treadmill of growth with no purpose. This is where having some clear outcomes is essential.

Unfortunately until writing this report I hadn't looked up the dictionary definition of success. I assumed that a successful dairy farmer was someone that had made lots of money by having lots of cows, so I set out to find how you get both. Quite early on in my personal travel I was lucky enough to

meet NZ consultant **Lynaire Ryan** with the shared-vision discussion group run by **Mike Murphy** in Ireland. Lynaire was presenting her 5 Steps to Wealth Creation as most members of the group hold the ambition to become cow and business owners. She said:

1. Have a dream
2. Building a pool of money (saving)
3. Learning
4. Investing on a +10% pathway
5. Sensible borrowing

Afterwards I visited ex Nuffield Ireland chair and dairy farmer **Bill O’Keeffe** to discuss my thoughts up to this point. Bill asked how my topic was any different to Lynaire’s “5 steps to Wealth Creation” and hadn’t she just answered the question of how to become a successful dairy farmer? Bill had a point, but surely creating wealth is only one aspect of the story? This could just be a fast way to becoming what dairy farmer and 2015 Nuffield NZ Scholar **Ben Allomes** described as “*a rich prick in a grave*”.

While on a chance visit to 2004 Nuffield Australia Scholar **Paul Bethune**, who farms in Northern Victoria, I also had an interesting discussion on defining success. This was a standout visit for me. I had just spent a long weekend with fellow 2017 Nuffield Australia and India GFP member **Felicity McLeod** (Fliss) on their 300,000 ac sheep and rangeland goat station in far west New South Wales, south of Broken Hill. While on the GFP tour Fliss had told many tales of what it was like living and farming out there, but experiencing it for myself was mind blowing. Fliss lives 50 kilometres off-road across the farm from her parents, and when I visited they had destocked heavily due to well-below-average rainfall for the year - and the norm is only around 250mm.

I had done very well up until then dodging all the emus and kangaroos on the road in that area, but then managed to hit a lamb with the hire car and did considerable damage to the front bumper. I think most of the time on a Nuffield Farming study tour you are going to end up with a luggage, flight or hire car issue somewhere along the line: eventually I had all three. I rang Paul on the off chance as I wasn’t far from him and in true Nuffield Farming style was offered a meal, a bed for the night and some good discussion to take my mind off my disaster with the car.

Paul studied patterns of profit in the Australian dairy industry and felt that many of the farmers he visited who, within their farming communities, were held up as being successful, had been successful at the expense of their family lives. Not many awards won by dairy farmers around the world take into account how much time they spend with their children for example, explained Paul.

Paul and his wife Sally on the other hand were some of the most content people I met throughout my whole study. They were bringing up five young boys in the small house that Paul and his brothers grew up in and, although they had plans to build a bigger house one day, they were perfectly happy in the one they had. When I asked Sally about the plans for a bigger house she simply replied “*maybe one day, but this one does us perfectly fine*”.

Paul was a good businessman and good with people. He had enough quality staff to do most of the day-to-day tasks on his 700-cow dairy farm, freeing up his time for managing the business. He had recently made a good profit trading irrigation water from one scheme to another and was overseeing the building of their new 100-bail rotary parlour. The system was simple, based around autumn calving

and winter grazing. Although the area wasn't typical for dairying this meant that a lot of arable crop by-products could be purchased cheaply for summer feeding. This was an example of playing on the strengths of the area you are in rather than complaining about the weaknesses.

Paul said he had seen many farmers around him go out of business who were far better at fencing, welding, tractor operating and cow husbandry than him and why was this? He felt they lacked business, financial and general management skills. After dinner we cycled along the edge of Lake Boga where they live – *"the boys get chucked in the lake for a swim most nights over summer"* said Paul. Paul and Sally really had built a truly great business and great lifestyle here. I left feeling refreshed, enthused and with a good contact for a second-hand bumper!

Why do we need to be successful, why do we need to achieve at all?

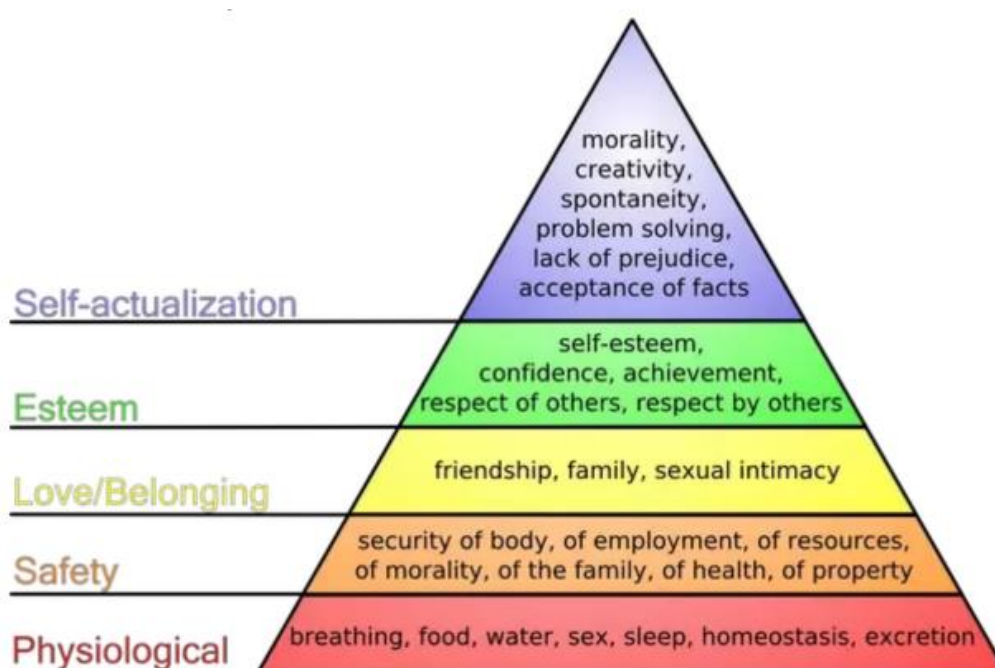


Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

<http://stemlynsblog.org/educational-theories-you-must-know-maslow-st-emlyns/>

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see above) shows our needs in the order in which we seek them. In previous generations and, indeed, going back to the caveman we didn't often work our way all the way to the top of the pyramid. Originally it was all about finding food to survive, then about safety, and on to seeking friendship, a partner and raising a family.

But today these are all seen as easily achievable for most people, so we move up the pyramid to wanting a sense of achievement. We might think, why worry about being successful - but it is a basic instinct in all of us to want to achieve, whatever that might mean. This is also driven by the expectations of our modern society and the drive from our education system to achieve "success".

In the rest of this report I will try and explain what I thought was different about those farmers whom I considered to be truly successful.

4. Figuring out your Why/Outcomes

“There’s no point in climbing the ladder if it’s leaning against the wrong wall”

If success is achieving your outcomes what do we think is the most difficult part of achieving? I would say it is figuring out what those outcomes are.

This might sound pretty trivial compared to some of the graft, grind and hardship involved in some people’s success stories, especially those who have started out with very little. However, when it comes to reaching your outcomes, maybe the ‘why’ is more important than the ‘how’. There are usually several ways of achieving the same goals/outcomes in terms of *how* but, once you know why you’re doing something, that’s usually where the faith and determination comes from to see it through.

I have heard many interesting ‘why’s’ for people’s outcomes from successful dairy farm business owners. For some it was seeing their parents milking cows into their 50’s and 60’s that gave them the reason to want enough scale and freedom not to be doing that themselves. For others it is as simple as being told enough times that they’ll never be able to buy their own farm, which led to them wanting to prove everyone wrong!

There is often much debate as to what the best age is to get started on your farming journey. Some started buying calves at the age of 15 and built up from there, whilst others did all manner of different things before settling on their road to farming success. For me this is simple: why would you set off down a road if you don’t know where you’re going? We all work out what our desired outcomes are at different times, so of course we start progressing towards them at different times. You cannot say that you should have started saving money to buy cows at a younger age if, when you were younger, you didn’t know that owning your own herd of cows and eventually running your own farm was the best way to achieve your goals in life.

You won’t get far talking to people who have put in some graft and made something of themselves before someone moans about the ‘younger generation’ and how they aren’t willing to put the work in any more. I think one reason for this is because young people find it more difficult now to figure out their desired outcomes and their ‘why’. The generation who are now in their 20’s have more options available to them than any generation ever before, and too many options may not always be useful.

We now live in a society where anyone can do anything and go anywhere. Is it any wonder that not so many people these days start building their farming empire as soon as they leave school, especially if they don’t know what they want to try and achieve?

5. Doing the right thing

“Treat others in such a way that you would wish to be treated”

As an industry we are forever being told that, as farmers, we need to be better business people and for some I think this act of becoming more business-like translates into more selfishness and less humility. I realised pretty early on in my Nuffield Farming travels that this wasn't always the case. If we are going to chase success and try to achieve our outcomes we have to make sure that we are doing the right thing as we go.

During the time the 2017 Scholars spent in Brazil on the CSC and its associated post conference tour we visited **Marcello Balerinia de Carvalho**. He farms 15,000ha in the Minas Gerais state of Brazil. When Marcello founded Montesa farms in 1989 he started a school for his own children and the children of his employees to attend. Today the school has over 100 pupils and, whether you are a cleaner or a director at Montesa Farms, your children are eligible to attend the school. This ethos of going the extra mile flowed right through the entire business: Marcellos's view on environmental and social responsibility was why not do the most you can afford, rather than the least you can get away with.

A similar business we visited was the Araunah Group where we heard from **Jonadan Ma and his son Enos**. This was a cut throat business environment where family members had to work to prove their worth before being given a position and it was considered that you need to be prepared to fire your son in order to succeed. At the heart of their business though, were some important core values that promoted *'quality of life for everyone including the soil'*.

Many times during my travels I came across people who have achieved an awful lot and have gained a lot of life experience, telling me that one of the guiding principles which they feel is a key to success is *'doing the right thing'*. This phrase always seems a bit woolly to me. How do we know what the right thing is? I think if when making decisions we asked ourselves *'is this the right thing?'*, most of us know the answer if we're really honest with ourselves. Doing the right thing refers to making sure that we are showing humility, that we are being honest, that we aren't doing things which could damage our reputation and, as I've already mentioned, we are doing the right thing by the environment and the people around us.

6. Faith

“The hope of things not yet seen”

By ‘faith’ I don’t necessarily mean religion, I mean having faith and confidence in yourself or situation. Faith that something will work, that taking a risk will pay off, the belief that you will reach your destination.

That said, it was a Brazilian farming family’s strong faith in God that made me realise this. When I asked **Enos Ma** why his grandparents chose Brazil over the U.S.A when emigrating from Hong Kong he said that there was a mix up with the visa papers and that this was a sign from God. I was blown away by this: imagine boarding a boat from Hong Kong in the 50’s with a small child to start a new life in Brazil with no question as to whether it was the right thing to do due to that enormous faith.

They also had a ‘why’. In many cases when asked about having goals, people didn’t necessarily have defined goals and milestones throughout their journey, but they did have enormous faith in themselves and their situation; and that whatever happened they were going to make it in the end. I think this application of faith also helps them to focus their minds on the path that they are taking and the end goal, or the reason they are doing it.

As with what I said about too many options not being a good thing, if you’ve got a plan, backed by some faith, there is a good chance that you will see it through. You won’t be worrying about whether you should have pursued other options and you will have more focus.



Figure 3: GFP group at farmer’s kitchen table. Varel and Scott Bailey of Bailey Farms Inc in Iowa explaining to the 2017 India GFP group how they manage their business and their soil

7. Business skills

As farming businesses have become more complex, so too have the skills required to manage them. When businesses were much simpler, being a good grass and cow manager made you a good dairy farmer and, by being a good crop grower, you could be a good arable farmer.

However, a vast number of farming businesses have evolved into very complicated beasts, and being good at the coal face stuff is no longer enough. Plenty of people I visited claimed that they had neighbours go out of business who were 'better' farmers than they were but were bad business managers.

At first I had thought that the most successful farmers were all good at IT - having met a few who were. Then I considered maybe they excelled at financial literacy. But in fact both were true as it comes down to having some basic business skills around the management of people, finance and time.

7a. How do we get those business skills?

Doing a business course might help, maybe a business A-level or a degree in agriculture that includes some business modules.

But do we really learn as much or as fast or as memorably as having a go?

Some of the farming heroes you meet who started off with nothing and built a farming empire learnt business skills by buying and selling a few calves at a young age, encountering problems, making mistakes and having the opportunity to analyse their mistakes and to learn from them. The trouble is not many of them remember how little they knew at the start or are big enough to admit it.

These days with much fewer but much larger farming and dairy businesses it is more likely that you join an existing one than start your own. Here you become a trainee, a general farm worker, a herdsman - but when do you get to start practising the business stuff and making some of your own mistakes that you can learn from? The boss probably does all that.

So learning whilst working in an existing business is great experience, but even for people making good career progression the leap to being a business owner or manager is a pretty big one. The point I'm making is that you have to make your own mistakes: simply shadowing someone who has already made them will help, but the best people seemed to have learnt the hard way.

Is it any wonder that in the case of grass-based dairy there are a number of people going to great lengths to keep things simple? In fact '*keep it simple*' is something I heard over and over again during my Nuffield Farming travels, no matter what the business or what the size. Keeping things simple will generally make a business easier to manage and reduce the risk of those business skills becoming over stretched.

8. Biting off more than you can chew/getting in at the deep end

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone”

Whether they were pushed in or had the courage to jump in themselves, I don't think you will find many people who have made something for themselves in farming who haven't been 'in at the deep end' at some point or other. You discover on a Nuffield Farming Scholarship that a lot of the old clichéd sayings you have heard are true - as well as learning some new ones.

One of the best came from NZ dairy farmer, Nuffield Farming Scholar and LIC chairman Murray King, who said that their policy for growing their farming business had always been to *“bite off more than they could chew and to start chewing bloody hard”*. I always thought being thrown in at the deep end was a chance opportunity that some people get and others don't. However, it is as much about grabbing every opportunity and it turns out there are plenty of people who seem to find a way to claw back from the edge or clamber out every time someone gives them the opportunity to *‘jump in at the deep end’*.



Figure 4: Farm visit attended while taking part in the Australian Dairy Conference. Depicts getting out there and learning from others as a way of developing yourself, broadening knowledge and gathering ideas for your own personal reflection and planning

9. Luck/opportunity

“The harder you work the luckier you become”

That old saying is true as well. I am told we’re all dealt the same amount of luck in life, and it’s our choice what we do with it. Most of the people I spoke to who have achieved their outcomes in their farming and personal lives told me how lucky they have been. The luck they were talking about came in two forms:

- Chance opportunities – which they saw the best in and grabbed with both hands, often even in some difficult circumstances - timing, financial etc.
- Chance meetings with certain people – which they saw the value in, gave some time, and nurtured into a relationship, usually one that benefited both parties.

They turned these chance opportunities and chance meetings into luck by the way they viewed them and dealt with them.



Figure 5: Murray Douglas NSch, Northland, New Zealand who has grabbed many chance opportunities with both hands!

10. Self-awareness

“The one tool you need for success? – a mirror”

Being successful isn't about being perfect. In fact most of the successful people I visited not only were willing to accept that they weren't perfect, but they knew exactly what their weaknesses were and how best to manage them. They were very self-aware. But is it that we don't all realise that we don't know everything, or is it just that we aren't all willing to admit it? Being self-critical is never easy.

One thing I think self-awareness and learning about yourself requires is some time. As we mature we have had more time to get to know ourselves. For example, by working for several employers you can compare yourself against them all, how they handled situations and how you think you might have handled them differently. Good relationships with some honest family and friends will also help. Sometimes we need to know how others see us.

Once we have overcome the problem of getting to know ourselves, self-awareness becomes an invaluable part of our personality. Many people use their self-awareness to employ people who are better than themselves in certain areas. One farmer in Tasmania whom I met told me that due to his character, he would never want to stop developing farms: so, because of this fact, he planned for any additional farms to be equity partnerships and consequently wouldn't be tempted to get so emotionally involved due to it being someone else's farm.



Figure 6: Mark Crave at Crave Brothers dairy farm in Kansas

11. Hard work and attitude

“if you’ve got ‘it’ then you should have a crack” – John Mulvaney

Most people I have met along the way who consider themselves successful have had to put some graft in somewhere along the line. If I had a pound for every time someone said to me during my Nuffield Farming travels *“there’s no substitute for hard work”*, I’d be a rich man. Some even look at you a bit funny when you ask how they got started on their journey to success - like you’ve asked a silly question. *“We worked hard and we spent less than we earned, how else?”*. I found this quite refreshing because as a farmer I’m not adverse to a bit of graft but it is easy to forget that some of the most important things really are that simple.

North Wales dairy farmer Matthew Jackson who won the 2017 British Farming Awards ‘New Entrant – against the odds’ award says it really is as simple as *“just get on with it”*. *“What you don’t know you can learn, and the hurdles you come across you can find a way to get around”*. As I said previously many people gloss over the hard work or the fact they learnt everything as they went along. Usually they set out with some hard work and a bit of attitude.

By attitude I suppose I mean staying power and the willingness to take a risk and let yourself put some trust in the faith that it will all work out. Sometimes a bit of naivety even helps as, if you think about things long enough, you can always find a reason not to do something. Usually some thinking outside the box is required - although it turns out that in New Zealand and Australia they call it *‘outside the square’*.

I always knew when I got to one of these characters who would take the risk and make it work whatever the odds, because their story was always a great one. I would feel myself moving forward in my seat as they told their story, and then I would realise that a huge grin had appeared across my face, but quite often with a bit of a shiver down the spine. **As Aussie dairy farmer Graham Cope** told his story he said the electrician for the rotary parlour on their new dairy conversion called in on Christmas Eve on his way to the beach to see if the build was still going ahead, as he’d heard the pay-out had dropped yet again. *“No going back now, Bruce”* Graham recalled replying. I grinned back at him. *“Any advice having been through all that?”* I asked. Graham replied, *“Don’t be scared, have a go, she’ll be right!”*

A Kiwi farming in Australia, Chris Proctor, also says: *“When everyone starts going in one direction it’s probably time to start going in the other”*. That’s the sort of attitude we’re talking about.

12. Time

“The currency more valuable than money”

Time should be seen as one of the most valuable commodities on earth. When you go and visit a previous Nuffield Farming Scholar they are willing to give you some of their time because they remember how people were willing to give them time when they undertook their own Scholarship. It's pretty simple really. But most truly successful people seem to be prepared to give young people some of their time to share their success story. And quite rightly so, shouldn't this be the system throughout farming and throughout life as a whole?

To a certain extent it is. I think successful people are willing to give up time to the likes of a young visitor, an apprentice or a visiting Nuffield Farming Scholar. This is because in most success stories there has been nurturing and mentoring. They realise how important mentoring from people was in their own journey to success and therefore are willing to give back to someone else's journey. As I said earlier, they also realise that they don't know everything, and see this as a two-way process: that they can benefit from as well, not just that you're wasting their time.

Another possible reason for successful people being more willing to give up some time is because they have more available free time. They have created time in their business and personal lives, they value it and they don't over stretch it. This may just be a product of being a business owner and some of the freedom that comes with it, but I think it is also more than that. Getting control of time is one aspect of what creates resilience and enables you to thrive in times of adversity. Indeed, many definitions of resilience talk about having the 'capacity' to recover quickly from difficulties. In order to have this capacity I believe there must be time, in your business, in your own life and in your culture. I think this is summed up perfectly by this definition of resilience given to me by New South Wales beef and sheep farmers **Stuart and Gemma Green** which they had taken from **American author Gregg Braden**. Greg describes resilience as:

“A way of thinking and living that makes room for the extremes in our lives each day so we can actually thrive in the midst of these extremes, because we have allowed for them, in the thinking and living, rather than to try and live our lives as if this change is not happening and then acting surprised when it does”. (Gregg Braden, Aug 2014)

A lot of businesses, especially dairy farms, even sizeable ones, barely have the capacity to absorb someone having a day off for sickness let alone anything 'extreme'. A couple of different businesses in Australia, **Peter Notman** in Victoria and **Brendan Smart** in South Australia, introduced me to the term 'sale ready'. This refers to the fact that if someone drove up the drive of the farm and wanted to buy it, the place is tidy, all work is up to date, all records are up to date and procedures and protocols are all in place, resulting in someone being able to take on the business as a going concern. They weren't likely to sell but they could easily ask themselves as a check of how things are going, 'Are we sale ready'? How many farms, especially dairy farms do you know that are 'sale ready'? Probably not many.

Dairy farming is actually a good example of how important time is, because we talk in days. Days calved, days in milk, cows served in first 21 days - we must realise that although a day isn't very much

time, that each day is pretty important and can make a big difference. There's an old saying that the difference between a good farmer and a bad farmer is about 2 weeks. I think this couldn't be more true.

There might be 365 days in a year but.....

- 104 are weekends
- 7 or so are bank holidays
- 20 days holiday each for you and your staff
- Sickness
- Kids' birthdays etc

By the time you take out the routine stuff, block out 3 months for calving, serving, harvest and so on, is it any wonder that most of us end up focussing on what is urgent? instead of on what is important and not getting the basics right 365 days a year? When do we do our strategic planning, our taking stock of the situation and our big picture stuff? Quite often we are just on a treadmill bouncing from one urgency to another with very little control over our day or week. Time is in control of us, we are not in control of time.

I think this attention to time is just as important in any business, not just dairy farming. But why do we run our farms in this way? Is it just because we are all busy and understaffed or is it because it has become part of our culture and we no longer know any better?

I had never considered this before but one person who believes we can train ourselves out of the 'headless chicken' mode is Focussed Farmers founder and Nuffield Farming Scholar **Holly Beckett**. (www.focussedfarmers.com). Holly says that stress is a natural reaction to a situation that sees areas of our body like our digestive system shut down as we move into more of a flight mode, which would have seen hunter-gatherers move to safety when in trouble. When we're stressed we also become less creative and less able to find solutions to problems, explains Holly. So, while stress is a clever tool within our bodies for short term fix, it is not good for people who are regularly or permanently stressed by work or other aspects of their lives.

Stress in farming often comes from having 'lots of balls in the air' at the same time and Holly believes that practices such as meditation can enable us to train our minds to focus on the job in hand. Once our mind is focussed we can rationally assess what needs to be done, what the problems are, and how to move forward - rather than our previous state of overwhelming chaos. This ability to focus could surely contribute to farmers getting control of time rather than, in many cases, time being in control of them?

It is normally the younger generation of incoming farmers and farm workers who want more time off and don't want to work long hours, want to be more involved with their young children's lives, to have holidays and hobbies. If they dare grumble they get reminded of the days when the previous generation were shovelling coal and lugging small bales. Why would we have anything to worry about when it is all done with air-conditioned tractors? But working every hour and doing nothing else is a relatively new idea that has developed in the later part of the 20th century as returns in farming decreased.

Go back another generation to our grandparents and there was a lot more staff on farms, with most farmers attending market at least once a week. They would all help the neighbours during the hay season or in any crisis and there was more of a farming community that supported each other. Hence no need for a discussion group!

Don't get me wrong. It was tough back-breaking work, often just to put food on the table, but it was very different work. I don't think it put the same strain and stress on people mentally, you could plan your day and go off and do it, without the mobile phone ringing several times distracting you with other issues. Farms were smaller and less complicated. Perhaps it was easier to get control of time and be focussed?



Figure 7: Better management of people and time – the week planner on a dairy wall in New Zealand

13. People and relationships

It makes me cringe a little to think how I have treated some people I have worked with in the past. When farming is busy and stressful and you're working in a small team, it is so easy to become disillusioned with people and only see the bad in a person. Usually like in any relationship, after some time apart and some time to reflect, you see the bigger picture and the good in that person. Maintaining a healthy relationship whether it be with staff or other stakeholders requires assigning time to nurture that relationship. When this doesn't happen, it is very easy to get caught in conflict due to 'heat of the moment' situations and for relationships to break down.

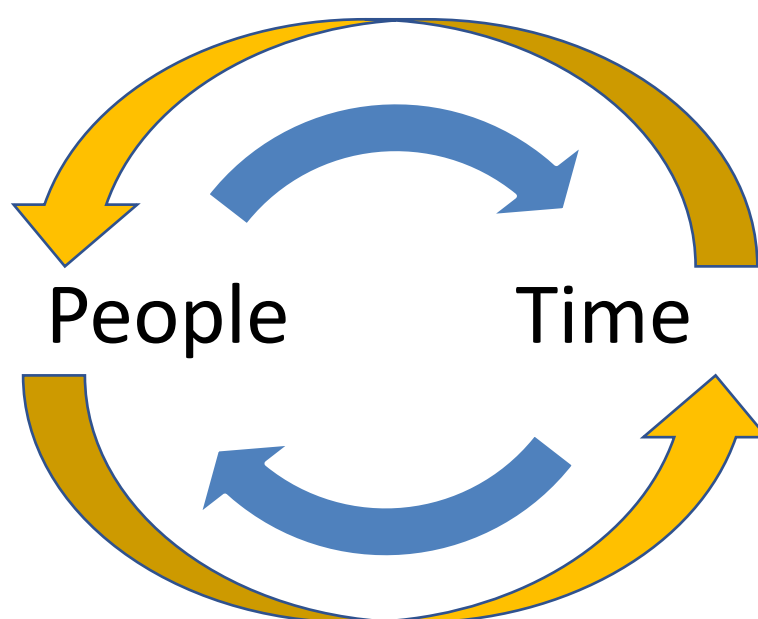
How many times have you heard a dairy farmer say something like *"managing cows is easy compared to managing people"*. I have probably said it myself at some point or other but I am getting a bit bored with it – if you don't like people then you are fairly limited to having a herd of 100 cows, milking them once a day and never having a day off. Also, many farmers obsess over their labour costs before anything else. In simple terms you could have very low labour costs if you got rid of all your labour, but you wouldn't have much output. So why, when we are trying to become more efficient, is labour one of the first things that gets sliced. Surely this only going to put yet more pressure on the team and ultimately affect performance?

But the successful people along the way (the ones who have time to give you and are willing to give it) seem to have a different attitude towards people. They see people as the solution, not the problem. They value people, are willing to share their success with people and see the benefit of developing and nurturing people. They want other people to be successful too. The term I have heard over and over again is that relationships have to be 'win-win'. South Australia arable farmer **Brendan Smart NSch** said that *"the real turning point for us was sorting out the people"*.

A great example of nurturing is when I went to visit a young Dutchman named **Aryan Prins who farms in Victoria, Australia**. He milks 300 cows and is buying his 120ha farm from the retiring owners using vendor financing. He had turned up in Australia 10 years previously with a suitcase and €40,000 worth of savings. Luckily Aryan's first job was at a well-known Nuffield Farming family, the Hehirs, who allowed him to rear calves and build stock while working for them. He would have been looked after well by the Hehirs and still goes around for Christmas lunch.

I discovered one of the other keys to Aryan's success in terms of people on a chance visit to the Galt family a few days later. **Dennis Galt** would have made a good Nuffield Farming Scholar: he was a good farmer, good businessman with good social values – he told me the story of him and his wife taking in German backpackers from the side of the road who had nowhere to go and building lifelong friendships with them. The Galt's farm was one of the places that Aryan used to go collecting cheap or even free unwanted stock-bull-bred dairy heifer calves when trying to build stock. The Galts had heard how other people had been trying to take advantage of Aryan by putting just the poorest quality calves in his trailer and sending anything with a bit more flesh as a bobby calf. This made them even more determined to help Aryan and to give him the best calves they possibly could. It begs the question: what an earth was wrong with the other farmers who wanted to rip off this young entrepreneurial fellow farmer who was just trying to have a go?

The way I see it, people and time are the two most intertwined factors that successful people and businesses have to get right. People are who create time but you need time to get the people issues right. I think this is a self-perpetuating spiral that gains momentum to the point when a business runs successfully, the people within it are able to achieve their goals, and more people want to join it. If the culture towards either of these things is wrong or things start to deteriorate, this spiral goes backwards and things get out of control very quickly. The people become short of time, which prevents focus on the people; the people then become unproductive making them even shorter of time. Eventually the people leave and no more want to join or, if they do, they don't stay.



Source: Author's own drawing

Managing time and people should in theory - and often does - become easier once businesses have grown to a certain scale. Achieving some scale and employing staff will free up time for the owner to focus on aspects such as management. This being said, I found that the very best farmers managed to grasp time right from the beginning, it was part of their business culture. The trouble is that more scale often means more cows/acres, more work, more balls to juggle and more people scurrying around. For example, if you rely on the notion that when you get to 500 cows you will be able to justify enough staff to take a back seat role and manage the business better, it probably won't happen. The trouble is that the magic day when you calve in the 500th cow and go and sit in your swivel chair in your penthouse office just never comes. Unless you somehow get a grasp of time and people right from the start, the headless chicken culture will be engrained in your business no matter how many people you add.

A lot of the businesses I visited in the States were very well managed. There was a farm office which many of them are very proud of, a hierarchy of responsibility and the buck stopping with someone as the general manager, even in family partnerships. They do have scale and readily available Mexican labour but that doesn't mean it is necessarily easier for them. On a visit to the **Crave brothers in Wisconsin**, Mark Crave said they had built nine buildings in addition to other works over the previous three years to expand their dairy farm and cheese making business, but were really struggling with the extra management. The farm office was the last building to be built but Mark said in hindsight it

should have been the first building built, to give them somewhere to manage from. Sounds clichéd but to me this is another demonstration of needing to set out on the right foot and get the management right from the start.



Figure 8: Micro dairy in Kansas. Do you need scale to be successful?
Bill and Sheri Noffke who have completed a lifelong dream and run a successful business at Skyview Farm and Creamery. They keep 20 Jersey cows and have a micro dairy which sells milk and cheese to customers around Kansas City.

13a. Leadership

A lot the things I'm talking about depend on whether you want to be just a manager of a business or a leader of people. But the fact is that most dairy farming businesses these days are of the size that they employ multiple people, so the managers of these business have no choice but to step up and be leaders of those people. Or so you would think. Due to having fewer but larger herds, people who do want to get into dairy farming are also less likely to end up farming in their own right or on a small family farm. Therefore, once again, there is a bigger requirement for the leadership of these people and to help them find their potential.

13b. The dairy farmer life curve

Australian dairy profit consultant **John Mulvaney** is well versed in talking about the skills required to make it in dairying. He says you need to have 'it' and describes people who have 'it' as having the following attributes:

- They have an ability to process complex decisions quickly and assess risk
- Most aspects of their business remain simple. If complexity is introduced it must be justifiable and profitable
- There is a degree of quantitative assessment used for most areas of the business – both daily and annually. They do measure but do not over-analyse.
- They are rarely excellent in one area of dairying, but tend to be very good in all areas.
- Once they have settled into their resilient steady state position then the level of annual analysis decreases. Progress will be gauged by the increase in equity each year which is the ultimate measure of creating and holding onto profit.

John describes the pathway of people whom he thinks make a successful career out of dairy farming in his dairy farmer life curve. This is useful to compare where we are versus what our aspirations are.

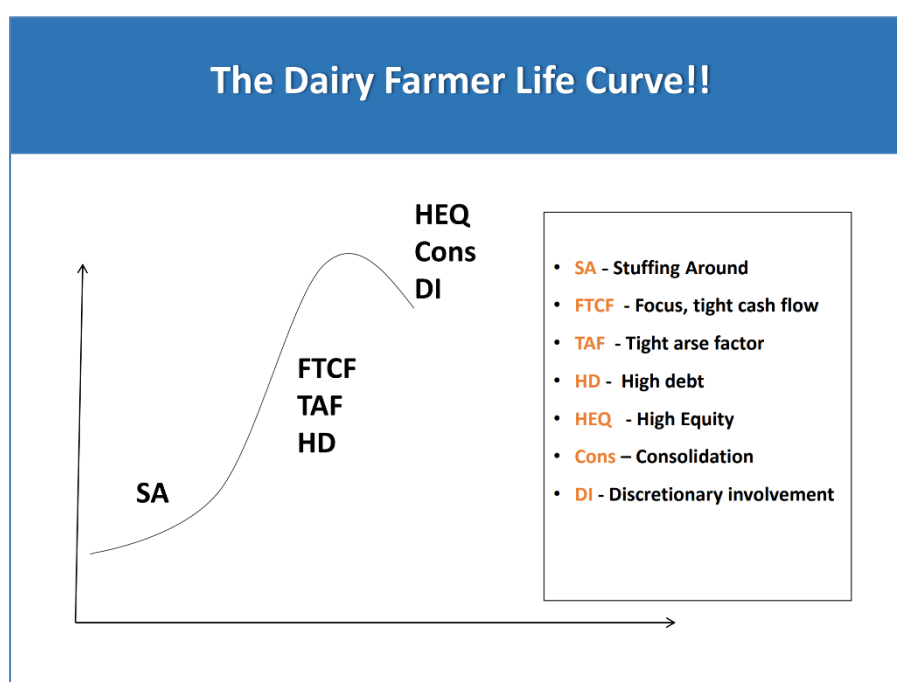


Figure 9: The dairy farmer's life curve. Drawn by John Mulvaney.

I think it is healthy to admit that most people did some stuffing around (SA – see diagram above). Not everyone you meet will admit it. There can be a lot of value in the stuffing around phase of people's stories. It might be where you learn about yourself, or figure out some of your plan. Maybe working outside of agriculture made you realise that you do want to be a farmer after all. You might be treated appallingly by a boss which changes the way you treat people in the future for the better. I think everyone should work for a good boss, a bad boss and a firm but fair boss. All of this can be done whilst technically being in the "stuffing around" phase. People management works both ways. Just because you've not managed people doesn't mean you haven't got valuable experience in that area.

For example, working for lots of different bosses or in lots of different teams can be a great way to learn.

The second phase is about getting your head down, working hard and saving money. Then on to high debt – investing, taking risk before increasing your equity and consolidating.

The final stage of discretionary involvement to me is what successful farmers achieve and what many never seem to master. It is this discretionary involvement that requires getting to grips with people and time so that a business can still run if and when you choose not to be there. If reaching discretionary involvement isn't in someone's outcomes we can't judge them for that but this does eventually leave them with limited options of continued full involvement or alternatively to discontinue the business. If you haven't involved and invested in people for your business from an early stage I think it is very difficult to suddenly do this at a late stage when you do want discretionary involvement.

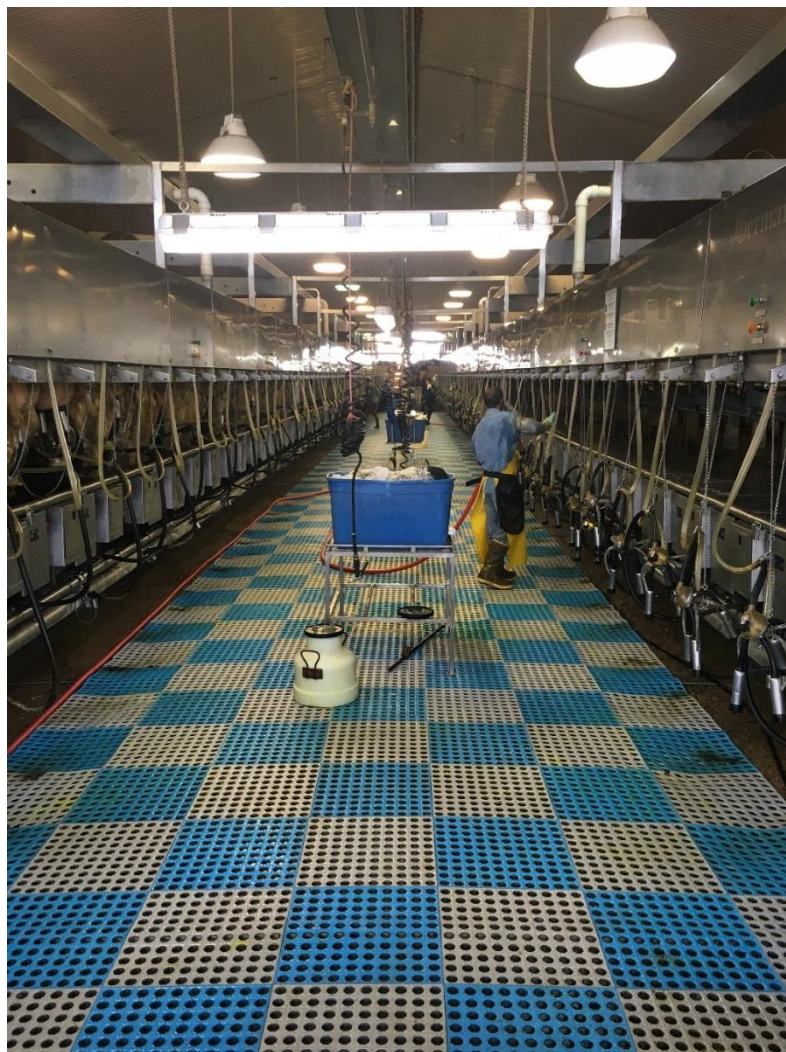


Figure 10: Do you need scale to be successful? One of the milking parlours at Royal Farms Dairy, Kansas, where they milk 7000 cows

14. Conclusions

Whilst the best people and businesses I visited around the world had some similar attributes, there were no defined set of characteristics or environmental effects that drove success. The best were the better managers of people, of time, and of their overall businesses. This was done through improved planning and by having a clear strategy. There is no silver bullet, no recipe to follow, no new discoveries or new technologies that we must all adopt. Most of the time it is about getting basic things right, not losing sight of the bigger picture and being best possible managers.

The single biggest thing I believe we can do to become better managers and to help achieve success is to invest in ourselves and invest in the development of young people. This needs to be a 'two pronged' approach that sees young people stepping forward and engaging in personal development, and a greater number of established figures and employers in our industry offering to help lead them.

As previously discussed, we all have different outcomes so if today is point A then our goal is to reach those desired outcomes at point B.

Success is the journey from point A to point B, so therefore in order to help young people become successful we need to help them to reflect on their point A, figure out what their point B is, and plan a success pathway for them to follow between the two points.

My recommendations on next page are aimed at aiding this.

15. Recommendations for Personal Development

1. Take a personality test

Personality testing isn't the be all and end all, and I don't think trying to fit us all into four categories is that useful but it is a great place to start. You can find tests free online and the questions will prompt you to think about your personality, how you deal with situations and how you differ from the people around you.

2. Self-reflection

How do we consciously self-reflect to become more self-aware and learn about ourselves. Starting with reflection on what the personality test has told you. Perhaps after doing a personality test it would be useful to carry out a SWOT analysis of yourself to identify what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what opportunities or threats this poses. Think about some previous events and situations and how you reacted to them. How does this differ from how other people would have reacted?

3. Get a mentor

A mentor could be anyone, you could have more than one. It is important that you get along and that they have some relevant life experience, but don't stress about this it's not a binding contract, you can always look for a better one, but ideally it would be someone like the person you wish to become. Ask someone that you know locally, or someone you have heard speak at a conference that you think might be good. Most people will be flattered and happy to help. The most important thing I think, is to get one as early as possible so that they know as much of your story and your journey as possible. A mentor should be able to help you decipher what you have discovered in steps 1 and 2 in order to complete 4 and 5.

Established people should also keep a look out for young people that would benefit from some mentoring and offer to help.

AHDB Dairy need to offer help and advice for those considering offering to be a mentor. They could also help mentors and mentees pair up.

4. Figure out your 'Why'

All the while this process should be helping you to start figuring out your "why". Go and see what other people are doing. Ask them how old they are, how does this compare with what you would like to achieve by their age, what advice do they have. Have a look at what training courses, conferences and events that are taking place in your local area and ask your employers if you can get involved in them, use these to gain ideas to set your own outcomes. It might be useful to consider how you view your parents' lives and whether your desired outcomes would differ greatly from these. It may also be useful to picture your perfect day or think about other people that you like and dislike in order to pitch where you would like to be.

continued on next page

It's 10 years from now. You wake up. Where are you? Who are you with? In the afternoon a friend comes to visit you. What would they say about YOU?

This seems an odd question but when you answer it honestly it will then give you a good idea of what you're trying to achieve and how much money this will take. The bit about your friend coming round is to see how you will behave to get what you want. As I have discussed, not all 'successful' people are happy. Anything over a five year goal is going to be too overwhelming to comprehend at a first attempt. This can be reviewed as often as required to see if anything has changed. Point A will always be today and point B can be at any point in the future so it is very much an evolving process.

5. Make a plan

This one isn't easy, but it is important whether you are young or old and both go hand in hand. If you are young where do you want to be in 10 years and, if you are old, what people might you need to bring into your business over the next 10 years? What are you going to do over the next year to try and focus more on your personal development? How are you going to make time for this?

Whilst mentoring and personality testing are much more commonplace outside of agriculture I think they are more culturally alien within agriculture and this is something we need to address as an industry. There are some great courses such as the Tesco Future Farming Foundation, Wealth Creation Course and the AHDB Dairy Leader Development Programme but these are mostly aimed at people with a partially established career. I think there is scope to include more personal leadership training in agriculture courses at all the agricultural colleges.

16. After my study tour

Now it is time for me to put some of these theories into action. Nuffield Farming has given me a greatly more balanced new outlook. On the one hand tremendous enthusiasm for a future in production agriculture, take that risk, make that leap, borrow the money, bite off more than you can chew. Coupled with those values of: don't rip people off, don't steal from the environment, don't exploit people, make sure it is win-win. Get a handle on people and time.

I don't want to just include these learnings in my own future farming endeavours, I want to help other young people learn from them and to better themselves, not least by providing every opportunity that I can within my own scope. I would like to persuade other people to take time out to learn as I have, and also find some more Nuffield Farming Scholar applicants who I believe are out there putting in the hard farming slog, not realising that they would be suitable.

I have often referred to "now embarking on my own farming journey" and I always imagined this being as a continuation of our family farm in West Cornwall. Fitting around family farming culture is a big challenge after many years at University, working away and, now, my Nuffield Farming experience. Over 80% of farms in the UK are family run, where the majority of the labour is provided by family members. (Ref: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Agriculture_statistics_-_family_farming_in_the_EU). Many of these partnerships and structures were set up a long time ago when divorce was uncommon and when family members, spouses and children were generally happy to work for their keep, not expecting market salaries to pay for holidays, hobbies and material belongings. Thankfully it is common now for young people who grow up on these family farms to remain in education for longer and to gain other experience before actively joining these businesses - which are often quite isolated. Here, though, lies the challenge for young people: to fit back into these businesses, should they wish to and if they are offered.

Having had a couple of succession meetings with my own family, I am hopeful that we can use our existing farming business as a platform from which I can set out to achieve my goals and outcomes and in turn help my parents with their retirement goals. With lots of parties involved with different views and outcomes there will have to be some compromises in order to find a win for everyone. Ultimately the challenge for me will be at what point the step-up of having family support versus starting somewhere else is outweighed by the time delays and restrictions posed by family politics and tradition. It is, though, important to remember that success is a journey from A to B so we don't need it all tomorrow, we just need to be on the right track. In the meantime I will continue to help manage the family farm in its current form on a part-time self-employed basis, coupled with other free-lance work elsewhere.

David Hichens

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