



The Farm Manager

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This new series of articles will address two related topics on Farm Management.

[1] Managing the Farm Worker

Once you have one or more hired help, the dynamics of managing the farm begin to change. Now your time and attention will be diverted to worrying about whether the work is getting done the way it should. Invariably, you'll get drawn into the trap of running after the help to make sure they finish the job properly; or worse, finishing the job for them! You know the work would get done faster and better if you did it, and the help stand around watching you do it.

Then there are the squabbles between the staff, or latecomers, or no-shows, or the workers who just can't do anything right, or the ones who can stretch out an hour's work for half a day. Thankfully, there's also the workers who are dependable, cooperative, learn fast, think on their feet and take initiative, and put in a full day's work. But how can you get them all to be like that, and better yet, stay with you?

This column will address those issues and more – not with generalities but with specific, practical advice on what you should do (and say) to supervise your farm workers successfully – so they do what needs to be done, when it must be done, and the way you want it done without you having to run after them.

[2] Is Your Farm a Business or Just a Job?

A case can be made that for the vast majority of farmers, skills and processes for managing farm employees is a non-issue. With only one or two long-term farm hands and some family help, the work gets done pretty much the way it should. Your real concerns are about the weather, the markets and the cost of supplies. You know what needs to be done and you ensure it's done right. Over the years you've learned how to work very effectively with the few workers you do have, so you really don't want more hired help and the headaches that comes with managing them. From that perspective, it's hard to argue.

But what you've built for yourself is just a *job*, and not a *business*. When you don't do the work, it doesn't get done. Even with helpers, you have to be there to ensure things go right. The farm has successfully flown by the seat of *your* pants, not theirs! It's a 24 hour / 7 day a week job. So when you leave the farm to the next generation, what do they get? Property, equipment, assets, and debts; but without your experience and the knowledge and skills in your head, it's not a business they've inherited.

If you want your farm to be a *business*, then you have to start to make it less dependent on you and begin to turn it into a farm *system* that you can manage (or anyone with some training, even the son-in-law). Then you manage the system, and the farm doesn't manage you. Then your estate will inherit a successful farm business (system) that retains its value even without you.

This requires you to implement a *Performance Management System* into your farm: a systematic way to ensure that the farm is run the way you want, and that whoever is involved in the farm's operation from family members to hired hands, perform their roles appropriately and are held accountable. This you can't do from the back of an envelope – you need to do it carefully and systematically; but it's very feasible. Future columns will show you what to do.



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