



The Farm Manager

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The Number One Reason For Performance Problems

The most common reason why employees don't get the job done the way you want is unclear direction. Very often we assume too much and presume that our workers know what we want them to do: tasks and workmanship that are obvious and common sense and us. For no logical reason we sometimes think that the work ethics and values we took years to develop or that are a characteristic of past generations, are resident in our new workers.

Sometimes we "manage by dropping hints," never being specific about our true expectations (Do I really have to tell him everything?!). We just drop hints and hope the workers catch on. Employees who can read our mind succeed. Those who can't, fail, and we clean up the mess.

The solution of course is for managers to make the effort to be specific about what they really want their workers to do – no guessing, no hints, just straightforward honesty. But if it were that simple, unclear direction wouldn't be the number one reason for employee performance problems.

The difficulty is because "clear job direction" is a collection of discrete, yet interrelated components that must all be clarified.

You've Got No Choice !!

Whether you like it or not the following sources of direction for your employees **all exist** on your farm: performance expectations, policies, procedures, priorities, job descriptions, goals, performance standards, and performance factors.

You can't wish them away or ignore them; they are all be there to influence your farm employees. **You have no choice.** They all need to be clarified for each of your workers.

For example, whether you have documented job descriptions for your farm hands or not; job descriptions exist anyway. Because if you don't define the job, the farm hands will "figure out" what they assume the job is and act accordingly. If you don't establish what your employees' job priorities should be, your employees will intuitively allocate their time anyway. If you don't make it clear what your performance expectations are for every employee, each one will "figure out" on his own what he thinks makes sense. If you don't make it clear

what the preferred procedures are for a job, procedures will be developed and used anyway, and probably not exactly what you would have wanted. And if you don't make it clear what your policies are for specific situations, employees will use their own initiative and base their decisions on what they assume are appropriate policies. But what are the consequences if they're wrong?

In other words, if you don't fill in all the gaps in the direction your employees receive, be prepared that someone else will; maybe the employees themselves, maybe their coworkers, who knows? And if so, you run the risk that what the employee presumes you expect, usually in good faith, isn't on the mark. As a result you'll get performance problems, errors, lowered employee self-confidence and morale, wasted money, time, momentum and effort — all of which could have been prevented if you took the time to make sure that performance expectations were clear and specific.

What is important is that both you and your employees have a common understanding of specifically what's going on in their jobs — especially if you're ultimately responsible for the activity of your employees.

What About Creativity and Freedom?

Can't there be such a thing as too much direction? When does direction reach the point of meddling or smothering employee initiative and creativity?

And of course there can be too much direction, and yes we don't want to eliminate creativity and initiative. But how much specific direction the employee *wants* should not be your guide; rather, how much specific direction is *required*. The rule of thumb is to make sure that direction is clear enough and in enough detail so that both you and the employee have the same understanding of the performance expectations. If you have expectations regarding how a job is to be done or the required results, there's no sense in keeping them secret. It is simply illogical to let employees fail because we refused to let them know what we wanted. Playing mind games with employees comes across as a disrespectful, selfish, power trip and has no place in management practice. Only if you have no expectations about what an employee is to do or achieve in a job would you not seek to clarify direction. But that situation should never exist.

What about freedom to perform? Employees need that, but give them that freedom once they know what to perform and in what context. In other words, give them some structure — direction, parameters, limitations, etc.

The philosopher Erich Fromm once wrote:

“True freedom is not the absence of structure — letting people go off and do whatever they want — but rather a clear structure that enables people to work within established boundaries in an autonomous and creative way.”

So even if you expect creativity or initiative from employees, you still should clarify what you mean by creativity or initiative on *your* farm, what is acceptable and what is not.

Document Direction: Get it Written Down

The act of writing down direction on paper helps to ensure clarity. It's never as clear in your head as it is on paper. So give hard copy of your directions (job descriptions, job priorities, procedures, performance standards, etc.) to each employee so there's no misunderstanding about what and how jobs are to be done. Even if you don't know what you want an employee to do, or you don't care (a strange but possible situation) then make *that* clear to the employee. However, if you do have expectations of your people, it's unfair to you both and a little illogical to keep your expectations secret; and then feel disappointed when they're not met. Don't manage by dropping hints. When the employee's main challenge in his job becomes figuring out what he's supposed to do, frustration and failure are inevitable.

And a significant advantage of clear, documented direction is employee accountability. It's always easier to hold employees accountable when performance expectations were clear and unambiguous at the outset.



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