



Information for an Industry on the Move

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Your Greatest Assets: Teams and Ideal Team Players

By Kristine Ranger, Guest Columnist

Editor's Note: Kristine Ranger is a lifelong educator and advocate for agriculture. She has degrees in Animal Husbandry and A.N.R.E. from Michigan State University and a Masters in Adult Education from South Dakota State University. While at MSU, she worked at the MSU Swine Barns and has delivered lessons in classrooms, board rooms, arenas, and barns for over 27 years. She coaches Herdsmen in HRM and teambuilding, and consults with farm owners to increase their leadership and organizational effectiveness. She is an Authorized Partner for Wiley workplace solutions and an Accredited Facilitator for The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team.

My goal here is to get you thinking more strategically about your human assets, especially in terms of how they perform on a team. With labor shortages impacting every segment of agriculture, it can be a challenge just to complete daily farm chores, but farm owners who lack knowledge and understanding about best practices in human resource management and development, and teamwork are at a distinct disadvantage. Farm laborers often work in shifts or teams, so not having a deliberate approach to recruiting, hiring and onboarding for improved team performance can be costly to the operation and demoralizing to individual employees, teams and managers. The latter group often spends up to three hours per day on interruptions because teams are dysfunctional; they waste time waiting for direction, get bogged down in conflict and personality differences, and pursue personal goals over team goals.

How you handle your human assets, or human resources (HR), can positively or negatively affect team results, turnover and profitability.

How Mismanagement Affects the Bottom Line

The true cost of turnover is seldom computed on farms. From comparable industry figures, we know that in jobs earning under \$30,000 a year, we can estimate the cost to replace a \$10/hour farm employee at \$3,328. For mid-range positions (earning \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year) the true cost would be closer to \$8,000/turnover. If your operation has annual turnover of 20% or higher, this affects

profitability, performance and your employment brand (aka reputation) in the community.

Another metric that impacts profitability, but is often ignored, is engagement. According to Gallup Poll, while there have been some slight ebbs and flows, less than one-third of U.S. employees have been engaged in their jobs and workplaces during the past 15 years -- meaning they are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace -- and two-thirds are disengaged.

Disengagement is an indirect cost to a farm business in lost wages, time and employee morale. If we assume that all employers hire good people; people who inherently want to do a good job, how do we explain the attrition from engaged to disengaged? Or consider the “actively disengaged”, which can be expressed thru vandalism, high absenteeism, insubordination and other acts of destruction. How do we slow the progression from “hire to fire” and keep workers satisfied in agriculture jobs?

a) It's not just the money.

Contrary to popular belief, salary is a satisfier, not a motivator. Performance will improve when people receive constant feedback on progress towards concrete goals and they are celebrated when they reach goals. Compared to verbal encouragement, the brain acclimates to higher pay very quickly and thereby ceases to be an incentive. Keep in mind that using bonus pay to reward an individual's performance often leads to competition, rather than collaboration. According to experts, the worst thing you can do is pit employees against each other. In other words, treat people who work for you as human beings, not human capital.

b) Managing Human Resources Must Be Somebody's Job.

You've probably heard or read that employees don't leave jobs, they leave people - specifically their boss or supervisor. Approximately 35 percent of U.S. workers would forgo a raise to see their boss fired and 75 percent of employees say their boss is the worst or most stressful part of their job. These high percentages are often the direct result of a manager in a small business operation who doesn't have time in his or her day to think about strategic people management or workforce planning. When you consider that the charter of HR is to “optimize the ability of a business to perform and complete” it seems logical that smaller operations could benefit more from a virtual or onsite HR Manager; someone who can have meaningful

conversations, listen and ask the right questions. Ideally, a talented HR person can manage the entire workforce so it fulfills its role as efficiently as possible and integrates human resource development with organizational change and improvement efforts.

c) Build high performing and cohesive teams.

High performing teams, such as those who are collectively responsible for feeding, sow care, farrowing, breeding, or agronomy can become a competitive advantage for farms. You'll know you have achieved that goal when all team members are committed to shared goals and they truly care about each other. As team manager or supervisor, you can encourage the latter by posting production or personal successes on a large board, arranging team outings or events for community service, learning new skills together, or even supporting each other during emotionally difficult times such as high pig mortality losses.

d) Increase engagement.

Increasing engagement means eliminating the root causes of job misery: anonymity, immeasurability and irrelevance. To make any job more fulfilling and more engaging, you should focus your coaching efforts to ensure that the following conditions are present in the workplace:

- Everyone knows AND understands everyone else on the team; they take a personal interest in others.
- Everyone understands their contribution to the farm and the overall success of the business,
- Everyone has an opportunity to measure or monitor their progress.

While inclusiveness and engagement are good, many business consultants are warning that engagement is not enough. They're even suggesting that empowering employees to track simple metrics like conception rate, mortality rate or litter sizes has additional advantages: it brings passion and joy to work. Joy is the outcome of doing something important as a member of a trusted team, a team where members hold each other accountable to shared results. Employees who develop a passion for their work are more likely to stay and perform.

e) Find and keep ideal team players

Patrick Lencioni, world renown business consultant and author of *The Ideal Team Player*, has defined three individual virtues that are needed to overcome dysfunctional teams

in the workplace. You can attract these kinds of people to your farm if your recruiting, hiring and selection practices are fully integrated with the desire to create high performing teams. If teamwork is critical to your success, your highest priority should be on identifying and hiring the “A” players who can demonstrate the three attributes of effective teamwork: humble, hungry and smart.

Humble

Ideal team players are humble. They lack excessive ego or concerns about status. Humble people are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit, emphasize team over self and define success collectively rather than individually.

Hungry

Ideal team players are hungry. They are always looking for more. More things to do. More to learn. More responsibility to take on. Hungry people almost never have to be pushed by a manager to work harder because they are self-motivated and diligent. They are constantly thinking about the next step and the next opportunity.

Smart

Ideal team players are smart. They have common sense about people. Smart people tend to know what is happening in a group situation and how to deal with others in the most effective way. They have good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics and the impact of their words and actions. People skills can be identified and teased out with job interviewing questions and scenarios, or employees can gain this important skillset from credible resources and tools (such as Everything DiSC Workplace Profile), workshops and coaching.

In summary, high performing, cohesive and functional team members trust each other; they avoid wasting time talking about the wrong issues and revisiting the same topics repeatedly because of lack of buy-in. Highly functional teams also make higher quality decisions and accomplish more in less time and with less distraction and frustration. They also hold each other accountable to decisions. The desirable “A” players that you want as career achievers (as opposed to job seekers) or possibly even potential successors to your farm, rarely leave when they feel like an insider and when they are part of a cohesive team.

Utilizing an HR Support System to Improve Teamwork

Not all farms have the luxury of using teams, but many

operations are mismanaging the recruiting and selection process and misrepresenting their farm because of a lack of practical knowledge about the human resource system and human resource management (HRM) practices. They hire the wrong people because they are unclear about the kinds of people needed on their operation to fit their culture and their teams. They attempt to solve problems by addressing individual parts of the HR system, rather than studying how the interdependent components can work together to accomplish the aim of the whole. Additionally, management has not quantified a return on investment from performance coaching, a required HRM skill for engaging and retaining employees.

Your HR system can also be leveraged to develop capacity and clarity throughout the organization, from top and middle management all the way to every single new employee. That clarity begins with your culture. If the hiring manager can't communicate the company culture, he or she also can't identify a good fit for a job, role or function. If the employee isn't a good fit with *the culture*, *he or she quickly becomes disengaged and eventually leaves, often taking a good employee with them. Hiring the wrong employees is toxic to teams and bad for business.*


Final Thoughts

- Prime the pump. Get to know your human assets on a personal level and invest in their future with your farm from day one. Make them feel like an insider.

- Teams at all levels can become high performing and cohesive in a culture of trust and engagement. Being trustworthy and building trust are not the same thing, but both are needed to increase joy and passion in work.

- Leadership teams need to understand that changing the HR system will change what people do, not vice versa. Leaders are responsible for improving the HR system which is important because a bad system will beat a good person every time. Stop blaming the workforce!

- Management should focus on increasing job performance through more effective coaching and increasing retention through more effective hiring practices. Using an interview guide and targeted questions can help you identify ideal team players who will contribute to team success.

For more information on HR systems, building cohesive teams, or finding ideal team players, call 517.974.5697. Email inquiries are also welcome at kristine@knowledgenavigators.com. 

Labor Considerations

By: James A. Kober, DVM, MS, Diplomate ABVP-SHM, svsmi@4starvets.com
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First let me tell you, I am not a human resource specialist nor am I an expert on employee matters. These are just my thoughts and observations on the dealing with employees on pig farms from 30 years of veterinary practice experience.

The days of hiring a local high school kid for your primarily source of labor is over for most producers. Most hog farms today need full time, committed employees to get the day-to-day work done.

Make sure the interview process is consistent with all applicants. A standard application and interviewing process is necessary so all applicants are treated equally from the start. If more than one person is going to conduct interviews, be sure he or she asks the same questions as other interviewers.

Be sure the job description is clear and concise. List every job this applicant may be doing so he or she knows up front what will be expected of him/her when she starts. This is true for all levels of employees regardless of management level all the way down to the person that does the pressure washing. This includes days working per week, hours per day, and overtime hours.

Utilize a consistent and thorough training program so everyone knows how to do their job. Continue the training until the new employee knows exactly what he is supposed to do and how to do it. **DO NOT ASSUME PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO DO A JOB, EVEN IF IT IS AN EASY JOB.** Remember that most people you hire did not grow up on a farm so they have NO experience with livestock. Taking care of pigs is not intuitive to most people so do not assume they know how and why they are doing a task. If a boss feels he needs to hover over an employee because he fears the job is not getting done properly, then chances are the employee was not trained well enough in the first place.

Give employees regular feedback on how they are performing a task. People thrive on feedback. If a boss never gives feedback, the employee will assume the job is getting done properly or that the boss just doesn't

care. Also, when giving feedback, be sure to give some positive feedback, not just all negative. Most employees will not respond to continuous negative feedback.

Remember that not all employees are good at everything. Proper interviewing and hiring hopefully gets the right people on the payroll. After that, it is the bosses job to figure out the best spot for the employee. In other words, once you get the right people on the bus, it is important to get the right people in the right seat.

Here are some thoughts on keeping employees once they are hired:

- Work environment is just as important as pay and benefits to many people. Well-lit workspaces, comfortable break areas, and functioning equipment all add to better employee feelings.
- Don't ask employees to do anything the boss is not willing to do.
- Give an unexpected bonus (gift card, lunch, etc) occasionally for a job well done or some extra effort in a job.
- Ask for employee input when making a decision for the farm. It makes them feel like they are part of the team.

Finally, many ask how to keep employees over the long haul. High turn-over rates can be a tremendous drag on all the employees and make them much more inefficient. Employee turn-over is very expensive! What is the key to lower employee turnover?

I work with farms where most of the employees have been there for 15 years, 20 years, and even longer. I also work with farms that have very high turnover rates, up to 70% per year. The big difference is this: Farms with high employee turn-over rates consider employees liabilities and something they "have to put up with." Farms with low employee turn-over rates consider their employees as assets and feel everyone brings something to the table.

Are you hiring assets or liabilities? 

Where will you find the necessary LABOR for our growing Industry?

Authors: Dr. Gretchen Hill, Dr. Dale Rozeboom, Jill Cords & Beth Ferry

When looking at the future of agriculture in the United States, meeting our industry's personnel needs may be as important as the price of corn and consumer's preferences. The ability to staff our Michigan farms with capable employees should be a priority for all of our agriculture entities. When looking for a pool of employees what options have you considered? From an "early retired" population to 4-H and FFA members looking to gain experience and "work" on the farm to the college "intern", there is a pool of individuals who need us as much as we need them.

One example of potential employees is the group of newly retired or "seasoned" employees. Many times these are people in your community that because of their choice or a changing industry, find extra time on their hands and a need for more cash. This group of people knows how to go to work on a daily basis and understands how to take direction, as they have already been an experienced member of the workforce. The individuals from this population at times appreciate being able to tailor a job to their situation and preferences, as some would rather work in farrowing or nursery rooms than be a greeter or stockperson at the local store. The opportunity to hire these people on a part-time or seasonal basis can be a perk to the farm, as the need for help may fluctuate and these types of employees often miss working in agriculture and enjoy being on a farm again.

Agriculture in the United States could be facing a crisis situation in its workforce, as the demand for labor has increased and the labor pool has not significantly grown, or in some areas has decreased. The need for a skilled agricultural workforce to replace our current aging population has become more important as America has woken up and realized that we need more young people to focus on science and technology. According to the USDA's Agriculture Census data the

average age of a Michigan farmer is 57.6 years old. As this group continues to age, a new population will need to get involved. The careers in agriculture are numerous, and 4-H and FFA programs are helping to direct young people to these opportunities. Michigan farmers can also be a part of this enlightening by working with youth to help them see these possibilities in agriculture operations and assist them with gaining hands-on experience.

Are you looking for seasonal help? Have you recruited at your local 4-H or FFA clubs to help fill these part-time and/or summer employees? Although many of the youth involved have little to no background in the livestock or the agriculture industry, they are willing to learn and need opportunities to do so. Remember most people from the general workforce lack "farm" experience and these may be the people you are looking at to hire, giving a young person a chance and helping them develop a good understanding of what farming involves is a positive thing for everyone. That person may not become a farmer or work as an ag laborer but they will always be a consumer and it is always a good thing to have consumers that understand how agriculture works.

Many times those students involved in FFA or 4-H go on to secondary learning institutions to study agriculture. In fact, a large number of incoming students do not have practical farm experience prior to attending a university or community college. Universities do not have the faculty and/or facilities to give students the practical and "hands on" experiences necessary to prepare them for many careers or open their eyes to the many opportunities in agriculture. This is why most agri-science programs rely heavily on internships to help craft these experiences for their studies. For the farming operation that takes on a student intern the benefits are numerous and include giving you the opportunity to (1) bring someone new into the industry, (2) evaluate their

potential as an employee and how they would fit into your organization, (3) give you some additional help when labor needs are high or you have other projects that need to get done but no one has the time to address them. These internship experiences are normally looked at as a chance to screen potential employees without having to go through the interview process, they also allow the intern to hit the ground running if they are hired as a full-time employee. Over 50 percent of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources recent graduates find their full-time positions from an offer after they complete their internship.

How can you set up an internship for your farm? Start early; more and more students and potential employers are working to “lock-up” a summer internship plan by December. Others are not secured until February or later. If you wait until after spring break the first week of March, we can help post the positions but cannot guarantee a large response of applicants. There is also a broad range of locations for internships, and students many times intern out of the state for a summer or semester.

Jill Cords (a graduate of the MSU Animal Science Department) the College of Agriculture & Natural Resource Career Consultant, assists students and potential employers. She organizes the Science, Agriculture, Food, Environment, Packaging & Health Career Fair scheduled for October 3. Throughout the year, she works with an on-line internship and job posting service called Handshake. Employers can search resumes of students on the site. Employers can register for Handshake at msu.joinhandshake.com – the career fair registration is also on that site. Contact Jill at 517-355-0234 or jcords@msu.edu.

The Michigan State University Animal Science

Department offers ANS-493, a professional internship course that is coordinated by Gretchen Myers Hill (hillgre@msu.edu). This allows students to work alongside professionals to accomplish goals and specific duties. The internship “experience” is one that you or a member of your staff develop with some input from the student intern. Most students are looking for an overall experience to help them gain knowledge and skills in your particular area of the industry. A minimum of 10 weeks is required for the student to earn 3 hours of credit for this course.

This summer, students are interning in all phases of production in many species (beef, dairy, equine, poultry, swine & meat), scouting crops, participating in pharmaceutical research, assisting commodity organizations, working in non-profits, and assisting veterinarians. The range and depth of experience varies from internship to internship, as does the skill set of the interns. When looking to develop your farm’s internship program it is important to be competitive, you will need to pay your intern and perhaps provide housing if the student needs to relocate for the time they spend on the farm. Having a general idea of what roles and responsibilities, along with what the student will see and experience will also help entice students to your program. Internships can be part of a student’s education during any semester of the school year.

If you are looking for a way to source potential employees or want to have an opportunity to broaden someone’s agriculture knowledge you should consider developing an intern program for your farm. The potential impacts of internships are great, you may find a great employee for your farm, have a hand in developing the next research scientist or impact consumer decisions because of the positive experience they had at your operation. 🐾

Looking for more information?

The National Pork Board offers a toolkit of information on how to find employees, the hiring process and how to manage and train employees. Below is a sample of some of the information available in this toolkit. For more information, visit www.pork.org/human-resource-tools/



Candidate Selection

During the screening and selection process, you must drill deep, to uncover the best candidate. Doing so, however, adds time to the process. Improve your chances of making a good hire by considering some of the following recruitment tips:

- Pre-screen candidates. This is a must, even when hiring for entry-level positions. Doing so saves you valuable interviewing time and keeps you from lowering the bar just to get the position filled. Thoroughly review all candidates' applications and/or resumes before selecting candidates to interview. When your pool of candidates requires further narrowing, conduct a brief phone interview. Limit your inquiries to qualifications and abilities necessary to perform the job and perhaps salary expectations. Schedule interviews with only those who fit the qualifications for your position.
- Identify red flags within the application. The application itself can be quite revealing about your candidate. Stay away from candidates who have unexplained long spans of time between jobs, have frequently changed jobs in recent years, haven't listed references and/or display laziness in completing the application.
- Prepare candidates for the interview. Prepare candidates by briefing them on your company, the details of the position, etc., prior to beginning the interview. This might be something you want to cover when you contact the person to schedule the interview. This allows time in the interview to concentrate on the important issues like determining if the candidate's skills and qualities are a good fit for the company.
- Utilize an interview team. A team of two to three interviewers is optimal. Any more can be too intimidating for the candidate and feel more like an interrogation. By nature, one decision-maker will tend to hire people similar to him or her. The team approach encourages a harder look at the skills and experience that goes along with the candidate's personality. Interview teams are more prepared and improve the casual process an interview can sometimes become. Conversation is

necessary and informative. "Getting chatty" or being "too conversational" may distract from getting answers to job-related abilities, and could lead to legal trouble. Interview team members should evaluate each other. The types of questions should be discussed and decided upon ahead of time and members should determine who will ask what. The candidate's would-be direct supervisor should be a member of the interview team, whenever possible.

- Ask good, probing (but legal) interview questions. Prepare the basic questions ahead of time to ensure that each is job-related, not personal. In a nutshell, if you don't need to know, don't ask. Consider how you have worded your question to stay within legal bounds. For example, you cannot ask, "Are you a U.S. citizen?" However, you may ask, "Are you authorized to work in the United States?" Questions also should dig into details but remain within the acceptable lines of questioning when the qualifications you are looking for require it.
- Seek Contrary Evidence: When a candidate seems almost too good to be true, he or she might be. If you find yourself thinking that the person is perfect, challenge yourself to seek contrary evidence. Your desire to find a perfect candidate can sometimes cloud your vision. You may want to consider asking a question such as this one in your interview, "It sounds like you have done a fantastic job in the past as an animal caretaker. But obviously we aren't all perfect. Tell me about a time when things didn't go as planned." Conversely, if you find yourself feeling like the person just doesn't fit, don't give up too fast. Ask questions to make sure that your judgment of the person is on target.
- Check and verify validity of references and perform background checks. Don't rely solely on the interview when making a hiring decision. Keep in mind, no matter how complete your interview was, a candidate after a job may offer exactly what you want to hear. For an animal caretaker position it is recommended that, at a minimum, you follow up on references and perform background checks. Sameday offers are not always possible, and there is long-term value in maintaining the integrity of the hiring process.

All comments and suggestions should be directed to the:

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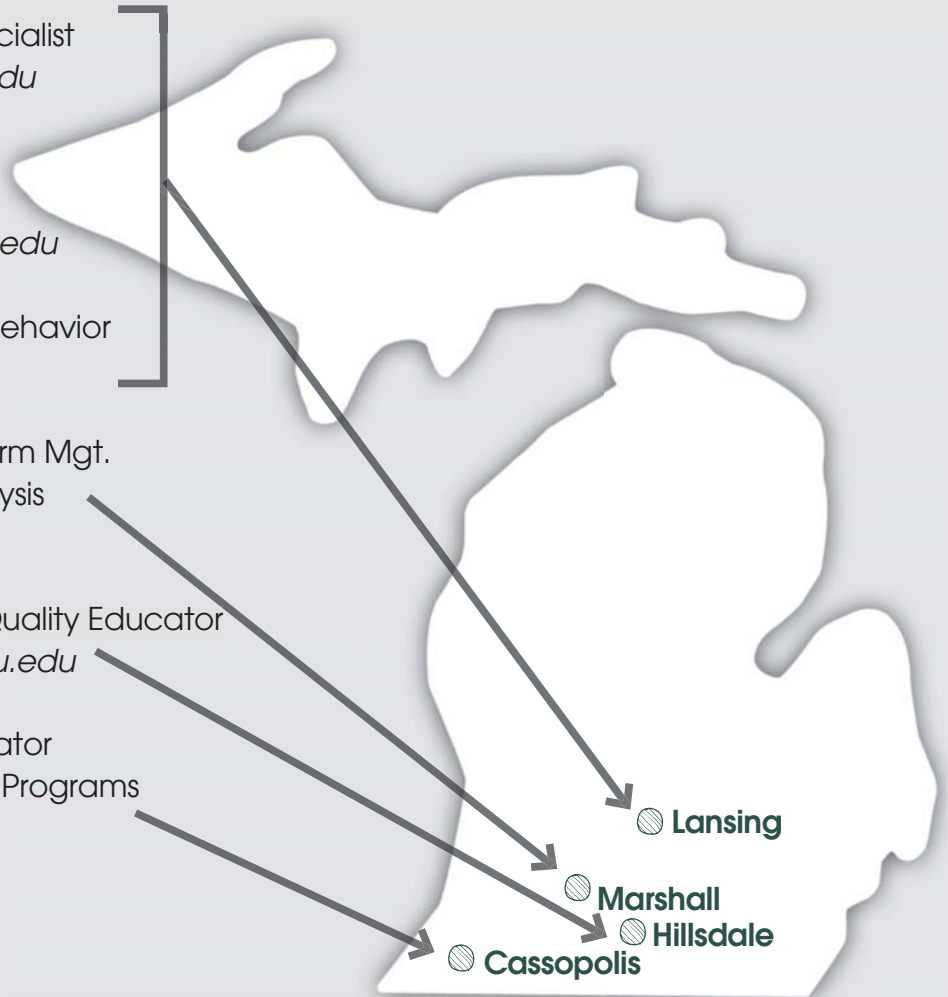
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