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Labour management

By D. Blesing*

Labour management is more than ensuring the tractor has a driver when the soil is right. It is more than a simple exercise of matching man to machine, more than the simple arithmetic of hiring and firing to suit a short-term budget. Labour management needs to be wise, sensitive, practical and system-oriented.

Wise labour management is one of the skills needed to ensure the farming business helps fulfill business objectives, and personal goals. It affects the farmer, family, employees, and the rural community. It can affect the prospects of the farm continuing under the management of the family.

At Hyden, wise labour management, in the short term anyway, means ensuring the tractor goes for as many hours as possible between April and June, and again in November and December. In ten years, with the mortgage gone, this objective, although still critical to profitability, may have been superseded.

Wise labour management covers the owner's labour, that of family and employees, and covers a period of many years, over changing goals and objectives. It will have a big effect on whether a farmer is still farming in 1990.

Sensitive labour management is particularly important if employing people, or using family labour on the farm. In both cases, farm workers probably will not share the same objectives. A casual employee cannot be expected to share concern for earning enough income to change a header, and buy another farm in three years' time.

How can you expect your wife to share your objectives of a matched set of implements, when her concerns are likely to be for education of children, appearances in the home, and possibly her own career?

Similarly, how can you expect your son to share your interest in work systems and planned budgeting, when at 20 years of age his planning may well include tactics involving girls?

Sensitive labour management will recognise:
- The motivation of people to be available, to live and work on your farm.
- The aspirations and goals of all the people you want to live and work on your farm. These may include: income rewards; job satisfaction; wide ranging experiences; attainment skill and practice; the need for understanding and involvement; work opportunities for all the family; education facilities for children and adults; and community amenities, such as pubs, clubs and churches.
- Matching people to farming systems (don't use a stock-person as a permanent tractor driver).
- Modifying programmes to suit people.
- Training people to understand your reasons for farming, to perform tasks well, and to actively seek better and more interesting ways of work.
- The need to find and train successors.

Practical labour management recognises certain rules, guidelines, and practices. It begins with a work system, includes task management and obviously is aimed at completing a job such as seeding, or harvest.

Labour management is performed better by some people than others, and it is a skill which can be learned. This learning need not be by trial and error or hirings and firings, over a 20 year period (as I did), it can be learned as a set of principles, with pitfalls and problems "experienced" in advance.

Task management uses various combinations of people, machinery, time and finance, within certain constraints of skill level and weather variability, to achieve specified management objectives.

Successful task management recognises certain combinations as generally being better than others and some of these are:
- Three or four man farms
- Multi-tractor and multi-machine farms revolving around one major tractor
- Round-the-clock operations at critical periods
- Bulk handling on grain farms
- Spares for key machines in isolated areas
- In-office planning of finance and operations, and continuing control from the office
- Planned maintenance schedules
- Monitoring of machine performance, work output and evaluation of the completed job.

Staff management is obviously affected by the increasing size and cost of machinery. The change of plant, effects staff, not the size of the new machinery or its cost. Rapid change is hard to cope with, particularly when strange and sophisticated equipment is thrust on staff quite happy with the old machinery and unaware of reasons for change. Some important factors therefore include:
- Communications and shared decisions on major plant items. Staff may feel threatened by the possibility of a machine replacing them.
- Staff need and respond to training and retraining. You may not be the best training person. Staff need confidence, particularly in changing situations.
- Machines of high value may warrant full comprehensive insurance.
- Staff need to know and understand your reasons for changing plant, your working plans, their place in these plans, to ensure a continual work flow and optimal plant operation.
- Staff need to understand what you mean when talking of increasing productivity; that extra productivity does not mean harder work.

My farm, and syndicates

I have learned much from 15 years of co-operation with various people, covering a range of farm machines.

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and operations, from a simple syndicated spray unit to shared land ownership and operation. We began by syndicating harvesting operations on two farms almost two decades ago, and we now have a group of 10 family farms linked together in varying ways.

Eight families own and operate a ram breeding group, which involves joint ownership of land, stock and plant, and shared management and operation.

Seven families operate together in a harvesting group, owning headers, trucks, bins and service units. This group harvests 3000 ha of crop for group members and under contract. Individual involvement varies from shared ownership plus a management role, to the supply of skilled labour only.

Three families share a farm shed complex which involves a shearing shed, sheep yards, grain silos, super storage and machinery sheds. Also involved is grain and super handling equipment, spray units, harrows, trash seeders etc.

Two families operate as a group farm, pooling their land, labour and working capital.

In addition, there are various combinations of shared ownership and labour swapping, arising from the mutual trust and sharing attitudes formed amongst the ten families.

The effect of these groups have been to create a desirable scale of operations, to create multi-man and multi-machine situations, with scope for either good management and success, or poor management leading to crop failure, argument and wasted time. Positive skills and attitudes I have learned include humility (sometimes enforced by the group!), budgeting, goal setting, maintenance programming, and the ability to compromise. Other skills more doubtful value include meeting tactics, the art of lobbying, bargaining skills, and using other people's strengths and weaknesses. One problem is that my partners have learned these equally well.

From our seven family harvesting group, with 12 people available to work, we have learned firstly that objectives of the owners are clearly and vocally not those of the non-owners. Non-owners need greater incentives than their fathers and bosses to work on Saturday and Sunday nights. Other lessons include:

- Training in machine operations is relatively easy in a group.
- The application of maintenance standards is harder.
- The value of planned maintenance.
- Some drivers are twice as productive as others.
- We all prefer the rostered discipline of fixed times and shift work.

From other groups, we have learned:

- The value of communication between landowner, management and staff. This includes using formal meetings and newsletters as well as normal talking.
- The different roles required of the farm manager (getting the job done) and of the chairperson or people manager (keeping all families involved and enthusiastic). These roles are difficult to fill by one person.
- The importance of allowing each family to get their own “thing” out of the group, for example, good looking sheep, good publicity, or the opportunity to drive modern machines, and for the group to still remain profitable.

Lastly, we have learned, or re-learned what everyone knows without being told:— when the crunch comes, all the theory matters very little, provided the tractors have people on their seats.

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Department to establish machinery centre

Money allocated in the last State budget will allow the Department of Agriculture to establish a unit at Merredin for research and liaison on farm machinery.

The unit will research the efficiency of machinery for farm use. This will involve liaison with manufacturers of farm machinery; monitoring of developments in new technology such as minimum tillage; continued work studies such as that done by the Kondinin and Districts Farm Improvement Group; and liaison with farm inventors. It will then be responsible for ensuring this information reaches farmers.

An advisory committee will be appointed to guide the development of the unit, including selection of staff. Initially it is planned to employ a senior adviser (agricultural engineer), adviser and technician. The idea was originally proposed by the machinery committee of the Rural and Allied Industries Council, which comprises farmers, machinery manufacturers and dealers.