

# Perspective on People

Employees are a key ingredient that determines the success or failure of any business or organization. And true leaders understand that to develop employees who are engaged, enthusiastic and loyal requires an investment of time — your time — in getting to know those individuals.

Patrick Lencioni explained the process this way in his September 2015 *Inc.* column: “The key to creating [engaged] workers in your business is as simple and cost-free as it is overlooked. It comes in the form of giving them what they want, need and deserve more than anything else: to be known.”

He continued, “...known in a way that all people want to be known, by friends and family. Who they are. Where they come from. What makes them tick. How their life is going.”

Lencioni underscores this important point: “When employees [or members/volunteers of an organization] feel anonymous in the eyes of their managers, they simply cannot love their work, no matter how much money they make or how wonderful their jobs seem to be. But when they are known, they work harder, promote the company enthusiastically, recruit other good people to the organization and make greater sacrifices for customers. All of which is more effective than any PR or marketing campaign will ever be.”

## Employee sustainability

Beef Northwest’s Kirk Jacobson shares this view of engaging with and investing in employees. He points out that when most owners think of the variables that affect their beef operations’ profitability, the first things that come to mind are likely feed costs, animal health and fuel or trucking. But Jacobson suggests there is another big one — employee management.

“To me it is one of the key variables that impacts

profitability,” says Jacobson, who is human resource director for Beef Northwest, a diversified agribusiness operation in Washington and Oregon. The company has 190 employees employed at four feedlots that have 90,000 head capacity, three ranches and a trucking company.

Jacobson oversees the hiring and training of those employees and says they spend a lot of resources on employees. He reports Beef Northwest’s focus is on employee sustainability, which he describes as “hiring the best, not settling and having the right people engaged in jobs with vision and a succession plan.”

Ultimately, Jacobson says, “We should all strive to be hiring our replacement.”

The result of hiring, training and fostering dedicated employees, suggests Jacobson, can be seen in improved net profit, better family time, less stress and worry, better job satisfaction, and a great reputation for the business.

Jacobson says a common mistake managers make is being a “control freak.” He says, “It makes us good, but it also makes us bad... Managers must learn to delegate, communicate and train. You can’t grow people if you don’t delegate.”

Thus, he is adamant about having a training plan for employees. “It doesn’t need to be complex; it can be bullet points with a timeline,” Jacobson says. “Know what you want them to know after two weeks, two months, two years on the job. With the development of this training plan, you are helping communicate your vision for them and their role.”

Along with training, Jacobson advises holding a formal bi-weekly follow-up with new employees. He suggests using a one-page form to score them and to share comments. “The ability to provide feedback is

important, and I’m told by many that they love it. We don’t give employees enough feedback. It’s simple communication that makes them feel welcome. You get to know them and they get to know more about what is expected in their job.”

Additionally, Jacobson promotes offering internships. He says, “Offering internships helps grow the pipeline of future employees for your business. And, interns challenge you and make you better. They see the business [and industry] through different eyes.”

In situations where an employee doesn’t seem to be working out, Jacobson stresses that early communication is essential. “Verbally discuss the gap between expectations and performance. Put the concerns in writing as well. Then give them an opportunity to meet the expectations that have been set,” he says.

Jacobson adds, “If you don’t have the guts to have a conversation, there is no opportunity to improve. So address issues while they are small.”

If the situation does not improve, he says, “Give them an exit strategy and keep it professional.” In the event of a termination, he says, “Do it right,” and emphasizes having legal counsel on what you must provide with regard to workers compensation, unemployment wages and/or liability.

From his experience Jacobson adds, “If there is a bad apple [employee], don’t keep them. Good builds on good; and your culture can pick up steam.”

Lastly, Jacobson says, “Managing people in your work force is very similar to low stress cattle handling. Every employee has a different background, and we have to identify that as leaders. Some have been chased by wolves and brow beat and just need a different manager.” **HW**