

Job Descriptions and Role Clarity

Keep all personnel on task with clear expectations.

Last month, I shared interviewing tips to improve your hiring process. This month, I'm building on that concept with a look at one of the most avoided tasks, which never seems to make it on a farm manager's to-do list: job descriptions.

Why is that? Most farmers tell me it's difficult to write a description for farm or ranch work because even the most senior staff have an all-hands-on-deck role. However, not having job descriptions, and even worse — having them and not sharing them — is an excellent way to create avoidable problems.

Job descriptions and clearly defined roles simplify responsibilities. Job descriptions allow staff to have their own area of priority to build and demonstrate expertise. Job descriptions form agreements and create opportunities for task ownership.

In addition to outlining roles, job descriptions help prevent a litany of unpleasantness including employee confusion, overlap/underlap in tasks, overall inefficiency, arguments at family dinners, hurt feelings, resentment, avoiding holiday gatherings and fistfights. (You probably have your own list, too.)

Getting started

Before writing a description, it's helpful to outline the role you need to fill. "Job description" and "role" are not the same thing, though these terms are often used interchangeably. This distinction is both important and useful.

*A **role** is the overall function that a person plays in the business. It may or may not have a descriptive title.*

*The **job description** is the specific duties to be completed by the person in the role.*

To better illustrate, I'll use the example of a CEO. As the CEO, you play that role. Like an actor in a play, the duties you carry out describe how you

perform the role. Attributes informing how best to "play" your role, such as unique abilities, style and skills, can be emphasized by job descriptions.

To begin building a job description, decide what roles you need now and what roles you may need in the future. Then, think about how to divide responsibilities to improve the current efficiencies of your employees and leaders.

Let's examine roles using the following questions:

- What functions are needed to run the business going forward?
- What area(s) of the business are changing, growing or decreasing?
- Are we prepared to meet those changing needs by bringing new personnel onboard or making time available for current staff?
- Where are other successful operations innovating?
- What current roles are filled by people who may be transitioning out of the business in five years or less?

Keep it clear

I am frequently approached by young leaders who share their transition frustrations. I often hear these individuals know what they are supposed to do at work, but struggle to see where one job starts and another stops. They are (painfully) aware this overlap creates conflict — much of it has to do with others in the operation becoming territorial.

To help prevent this problem, apply a simple rule — everyone needs to know what everyone else does, aka role clarity.

Role clarity is when everyone knows what everyone else does.

Role clarity should not be reserved for the elite at the top. It's important for every member of the business, down to the most basic laborer. People naturally function better when boundaries are clear.

Sometimes it is easier to think about roles in terms of what you need, but don't presently have. Consider the following questions:

- What expertise is missing from the business, even if I don't need it today?
- How will I meet this need? Is it with training or new hires?
- In what ways are we "just getting by?"
- Are we utilizing people or putting people in positions where they are "just okay?"
- Do we have roles now that we don't need or should phase out?

Helpful tips

Finally, here are three tips for writing job descriptions:

- 1) Be specific with the tasks you need to take off someone's list, tasks which need training or certifications to perform well and future business needs.
- 2) If there is a task not being completed, or someone is doing a task but needs to pass it off to someone else, add it to the job description, and bring it up in the interview.
- 3) Clearly explain to applicants that the job description isn't a generic job taken from a website, but rather a group of tasks tailored in a specific way to fit the organization. Describe how those specific tasks interact with other people.

Remember, if you're the business owner, write a job description for yourself as well. The most important place to start is the beginning. If you do, you'll find less conflict when employees and family have clear roles. **HW**

Sarah Beth Aubrey is an entrepreneur and founder of Aubrey Coaching and Training (ACT). She can be reached at sarah@sarahbethaubrey.com.