

# Enhancing Employee Supervision Skills

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## ■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Employees tend to leave bosses more than they leave jobs.
- ▶ Employee turnover is expensive, so reducing turnover increases the bottom line of the farm, plus creates a better working atmosphere.
- ▶ Good leadership creates an atmosphere in which people **want** to work rather than **have** to work.
- ▶ Lack of leadership from the owner/manager/supervisor tends to lead to negative attitudes about people and work.
- ▶ Leaders value the employees as **people** as well as what they contribute to the success of the farm. Employees aren't just a labor unit.
- ▶ Be an example to your employees. Your example creates expectations to which employees are more likely to aspire.

The structure of agriculture continues to change, and western Canada is not escaping that change. More farms are employing non-family members to carry part of the workload. Reasons include smaller families, larger farms, a desire to have more time for family and community activities, and families with more diverse interests than in the past. Also, it is not only large farms, but also relatively smaller farms looking for time freedom offered by having non-family employees.

Observing these changes also reveals some farms almost never have to hire new employees and other farms always seem to be looking for the next employee. Why should similar farms have different experiences? What causes employees to leave one farm regularly and on another farm the employees stay and are high performers for a long time? What makes an “employer of choice” among workers?

Researchers have found that employees tend to leave their bosses more than they leave jobs. While that sounds a bit odd, it is borne out by Florida State

University professor, Wayne Hochwarter and two of his doctoral students - Paul Harvey and Jason Stoner<sup>1</sup>. In 2007 they released a survey of over 700 employees on this topic.

Forty percent (40%) of those surveyed reported working for what they called 'bad bosses'. Their reasons for calling a boss 'bad' varied, but the most common responses included:

- ▶ 39% of workers said their supervisor failed to keep promises
- ▶ 37% indicated their supervisor failed to give credit when due
- ▶ 31% said their supervisor gave them the "silent treatment" during the past year
- ▶ 27% report their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers
- ▶ 24% indicated their boss invaded their privacy
- ▶ 23% said their supervisor blamed others to cover up personal mistakes or minimize embarrassment

Those reasons show the attitudes and resulting actions of supervisors are the reasons employees tend to leave an employer. We are here today to talk about enhancing supervisory skills, but I want to lay this groundwork so you gain a greater appreciation for the value of supervisory skills and their impact on the farm's bottom line.

Various industry sources suggest it costs 50% and up of what you pay an employee to replace that employee. This amount varies from industry to industry and by skill levels of the employee, but regardless of the percentage, it is expensive. You may be asking yourself. "How can it cost that much?"

That cost includes many non-cash costs such as reworking the schedules of other employees to cover the work; lost productivity of many workers who now are at multiple tasks and under some time pressures; your managerial time to check job descriptions, advertise and interview candidates; training time for the employee and the trainer, etc.

That starts adding up to real money if your business has a 25% staff turnover annually. If you can correct the actions and attitudes of supervisors that result in that staff turnover, how much could you save on your farm? This is why we are talking about enhancing supervisory skills.

We need to distinguish between management of employees and leadership of employees. They are not the same thing. A number of authors and

educators have put forth similar outlines of the distinction between the two, but I am going to share the DairyNZ version with you today.<sup>2</sup>

Leadership isn't just standing up in front of the staff and giving directions for what has to be done today, or this week or this month. Rather, leadership is creating the vision for what you want your farm to be and then enabling the work that can get to that result.

Management	Leadership
Administers	Innovates
Focuses on systems and structures	Focuses on people
Maintains	Develops
Relies on control	Inspires trust
Has a short-range view	Has a long-range perspective
Asks "how" and "when"	Asks "what" and "when"
Has their eye on the bottom line	Has their eye on the horizon
Does things right	Does the right things

It might be a bit simplistic, but the management column tends to focus on getting a job done and moving on, while the leadership column tends to look more at the people doing the job, developing them to continue quality work and working toward a more sustainable business system.

Dairy Australia<sup>3</sup> supports this very similarly, but still approaches the issue of supervision from a leadership standpoint. They suggest:

Good leaders:

- ▶ **challenge** the process – they search for opportunities to change, grow and improve how things are done;<sup>2,3</sup>
- ▶ **inspire** a shared vision – they communicate their vision and persuade others to commit to it;<sup>2,3</sup>
- ▶ **enable** others to act – they foster collaboration, build trust and get people to work together, thereby empowering others;<sup>2,3</sup>

- ▶ **model** the way – they act as a role model, and behave in a way that is consistent with their stated values;<sup>2,3</sup> and
- ▶ **encourage** the heart – they build confidence, reward individual contributions, and celebrate group achievements.<sup>2,3</sup>

“Inspire”, “enable”, “model” and “encourage” are key words to effective supervision. You will notice none of them are suggesting you direct or order the work or the workers. You are setting up situations in which the employees understand what is to be done, have seen it done, believe they are capable and supported to do the work and encouraged to go about succeeding in the tasks.

Our University of Minnesota Extension Dairy Team takes a short professional development tour each fall to observe new technologies, explore some management philosophies and see research in other states first hand. A couple years ago we visited several dairy farms in Wisconsin whom we felt had demonstrated leadership in the industry and were trying some different systems on their farms. The farms were of various sizes and levels of technological investment. The common thread we found among these farms, though, was the attitude that it was the employees who made the farm successful, not the owners. It didn't matter whether it was a farm with 4 or 5 employees, some of whom were part-time, or a farm with 50 full-time employees working with thousands of cows. These farm owners recognized their employees were the key to success. The farm owners shared the attitude that their own job was to do everything they possibly could to make their employees successful. If the employees are successful at their jobs, the farm will be successful in turn.

These farms made sure, first of all, that they had done a good job of employee selection. They were clear what kind of people they wanted to have working for them and used care in selecting the employees. That is only the start, though. Even the best potential employee needs to know clearly what is expected of them, be given the training and the tools to do the job; and then believe the employer has the faith in them to do the job correctly.

It goes right back to the concepts of inspiring, enabling, modeling and encouraging. Inspiration comes from the manager making clearly known what is expected. Expectations should be set high so good employees have a challenge in front of them. It should be achievable, not unreachable. There also need to be adequate recognition of effort and reward to make them want to reach a high level of achievement and performance.

Be sure your employees know what is expected of them, and be consistent. If you express certain expectations at one time and then suddenly change, or

reward entirely different actions, confusion leaves them not knowing what you really want and wondering whether you really care how something is done.

Consistency of treatment among employees is important as well. This can be reinforced by having good employee policies written down and clearly understood by all. Good written policies eliminate the need to make snap judgments and minimize the risk of treating employees differently. A common missing link on dairy farms is an employee manual that clearly puts forth policies and expectations so all employees know what is expected of them and what to expect from their employers as a result.

How do we bring employees to that high level of performance? It's leadership. The leader sets the tone for the entire operation. Their attitudes and own performance help set the pace for the rest of the operation. A leader uses influence, not power to get the message across to employees. A leader influences others to follow his example. Gaining that influence is what will make you a better supervisor.

Becoming that leader demands one have certain characteristics. Hank Wagner, a Wisconsin dairy farmer, puts **character** (integrity) at the top of his list for gaining influence. "Character is not something we are born with. It's not something we can go buy, go to college or read books to get. I think character comes from the choices we make and the person we choose to be, even when nobody else is looking."<sup>4</sup> Character is what makes you the one every civic committee wants as a member, rather than the one every clerk avoids in the local farm store.

Hugh Weather, a South Carolina dairyman, puts **relationships** high on his list of characteristics<sup>4</sup>. How do you relate to others? Do you enjoy spending time with others? Being a person who likes to spend more of his time alone doesn't make one a bad person, but they will probably not be among influential leaders, either. Developing relationships that better the lives of others, even in some small way, can gain influence toward leadership. Relationships help build teams in which the members trust each other's opinion and decisions.

**Empathy** plays a significant role in gaining influence with your employees. You need to show you care about them. Perhaps you have seen the poster, "People don't care about what you know until they know you care about them." Your employees have the same goals in life that you do. They want safe places for their families to live. They want warm homes and adequate food for their families. They want to have a few pleasures in life and they want to be able to save something for their futures. Is that any different from what you want? I don't think so. With that in mind, are you providing a work atmosphere in which they know you care about them?

Caring is personal as well as professional. How much do you know about your employees? If they are local you might know a great deal. If your employees are from farther away, or immigrants, you probably know little of what brought them to your area and your farm besides the availability of a job. Try to learn more in casual conversation and interaction. Their background will influence their work ethic and your caring will influence their work performance.

An individual in western Wisconsin has built a business in part on being an interpreter to help farmers with training and staff meetings as well as other related services. One of her signature activities is taking groups of farmers to Mexico to the specific communities from which their employees have come. The farmers often get to meet the families and see what the home communities are like. This provides the farmers with a greater understanding of their employees and gains them increased respect from the employees because the farmers have shown they care.

Another characteristic is **credibility**. Credibility comes from knowledge and experience. Employees will have greater respect, and you will have greater influence if they know you have been in their shoes sometime. That experience might have been 20 years ago as a young farmer or it might have been yesterday when you worked with the crew fixing the manure system. Knowing that you are not asking your employees to do anything you haven't done, or aren't willing to do, gains a great deal of respect for you the employer.

We need to spend a little time with the concept of communication and its part in effective leadership and supervision. Many of the concepts I have discussed are communicated by example, but they also need to be communicated in other ways as well. Earning that respect and trust also means having a common understanding. Communication helps keep the daily routine going and holds the business together. Good communication leads to motivated staff.

Communication is not just you giving instructions clearly, but it is also everyone feeling like they can ask questions and will be heard. On today's cell phones it is hard to distinguish, but desk phones still have hand pieces with a microphone for your mouth for talking and a speaker to your ear for hearing. The two are in balance. Communication must be two ways, and it must be balanced. Some even say it should be heavier on the listening side of the scale.

On the speaking side of the balance, you learn by asking questions of your employees. You can't be everywhere on your farm, but your staff is out and close to the work. They know what is happening, and what needs to happen. Ask open ended questions that keep you informed by using words like:

How?	What?
When?	Why?
Which?	Where?

Questions based on these words solicit information, not just a yes or no answer; information that you and others need to make decisions or know the status of the business.

You need to listen. Your parents might have said sometime, “God gave you two ears and one mouth so maybe you should listen twice as much as you talk.” It is the same in the business.

Listening isn’t easy. It demands patience. Some people cannot handle silence, but sometimes a bit of quiet time is necessary for a person to formulate a good response to a question. Don’t be afraid to wait.

Be supportive in your listening. When listening, maintain eye contact with the speaker; show them you are focused on them and their response. Be attentive rather than engaging in something else while they are speaking and don’t be afraid to use follow-up questions.

Communication includes feedback to employees. For many it is relatively easy to provide critical feedback when something doesn’t go right, but what about positive feedback when a job has been well done or a decision has proven to be correct? Look for ways to provide positive feedback to employees on a regular basis. Regular and sincere positive feedback builds the confidence of the employee and motivates them to continue high performance.

Sometimes things don’t go right and corrective feedback is necessary. When this is the case, provide the corrective feedback as soon as possible so what might be only a small problem does not escalate into a major one. Point out the desired goal and actions that help achieve that goal in a manner that reinforces rather than tears down the employee.

Watch for barriers to communication. People’s background can affect how they communicate. There are several messages in an exchange:

- ▶ What you wanted to say
- ▶ What you think you said
- ▶ What you actually said
- ▶ What the employee heard

Those four lines can each be different depending on your background, your mood for the day and the setting in which they were said. The one that makes the difference in the end is what the employee heard. They will process and act upon what they heard and if it is significantly different from what you intended to communicate, there could be serious consequences on the farm. Be clear in your communications. Remember that people learn in different ways so you may also have to communicate your message in different ways. You might say what you want and demonstrate or illustrate it in some way. Another good technique is to ask the employee to repeat back to you what they heard. Don't just ask if they understand, but ask to hear it back. Then you know the message received was the message you intended to deliver.

Communicate frequently and honestly. When people know what is going on in the farm business, they are more likely to take a degree of ownership and pride in their work.

While I have used the term "employees" rather freely in this paper, I want to remind you I have also referred to them as key people in the success of your farms. They are members of a team who, along with you, have a desire to make your farm successful. If you allow them, they can and will take pride in what your farm is and does. Remember, they may also have ideas that can make a difference on your farm. You can reinforce employees' value to your farm business by soliciting their ideas, listening to them, and involving them in decision-making.

Leaders are like a sailboat. The sail is up in the wind and moving the boat forward, but underneath it all is a hull and heavy keel that are necessary to keep it upright. All those extra characteristics are your hull and keel. Engineer and develop them and your sail of leadership should keep moving your business forward.

## ■ References

<sup>1</sup>Hochwater, Harvey and Stoner, Florida State University, <http://www.fsu.edu/news/2006/12/04/bad.boss/>

<sup>2</sup>DairyNZ HR ToolKit, 2008, [www.dairynz.co.nz](http://www.dairynz.co.nz)

<sup>3</sup>The People in Dairy, Dairy Australia, [www.thepeoplein dairy.org.au/working-together/leadership.htm](http://www.thepeoplein dairy.org.au/working-together/leadership.htm)

<sup>4</sup>Supervisor Skills for Managers, CRI, 2006

