

By: Barb Dartt, DVM, MS

INVESTING IN YOUR

TEAM



Mark called this spring, excited that he had two new employees starting work in a couple days. Including these two, Mark's farm employs five full-time family and non-family members. Both new hires had farming experience and were sorely needed to handle spring work. For this operation, it was important these two hires work out. I asked Mark what he had planned for their first day. His answer came slowly—it was clear he hadn't thought much about it.

“Well, they'll need to fill out their paperwork,” he said. “And they both have experience in the shop. I was hoping they could start prepping the 7630. That will give them a good reason to figure out how we've organized the tools.” I find Mark's response pretty common across my clients—and in many small businesses, ag or non-ag. Once Mark got his guys in the door, he

considered them full-fledged employees. Orientation and training were not part of their duties—doing the work was.

A couple recent studies¹ found that medium to large businesses spend 3-3.5 percent of annual payroll on employee training. Another study² found that 88 percent of small and large businesses

provide some kind of continuing education benefit to employees. In contrast, Iowa State³ found in a 2011 study that 17 percent of agriculture employers offered a continuing education benefit. Of the employers that offered the benefit, annual cost per employee was \$250, or about 0.7 percent of average payroll. In agriculture businesses, generally, investment in training and development is low. There are lots of reasons for this. Many farm businesses have grown rapidly and have more employees than in the recent past. Managers tend to underestimate the complexity and experience it takes to exercise solid judgment (or common sense) in day-to-day farm work. And

thinking about employee development means owners and managers are working ON the business rather than IN it—and that is hard to fit in while getting the work done.

Mark's approach is common, but represents a big opportunity. Increasing resources—both time and money—



invested in employee training and development can make you a more attractive employer. It can also help you develop entry-level folks into the higher level employees you will need in the future. So where do you start? Why, at the beginning, of course. Focus on your employees' first hours and days on the job.

Orientation and Onboarding

Orientation is a one-time event that happens on an employee's first day. It includes activities that familiarize an employee with their location, job and coworkers. Orientation can be conducted by the new employee's supervisor or another employee who is welcoming and experienced. Activities could include:

- A tour of the farm site and where they will work
- Introductions to key coworkers
- Explanation of things like:
 - Work hours and lunch time
 - Where they should park
 - How to punch in or record their time
 - Location of fields, names of fields, and/or maps
 - How to look up livestock information on the computer
 - Who they can call for help and important contact numbers

Onboarding is the process of clarifying expectations and helping new employees understand the culture of your business. It takes place over time – likely weeks – but should be introduced within the employee's first few hours on the job by a senior manager or owner. This initial session, which could last from 15-60 minutes, includes a welcome, brief overview of expectations, history and philosophy of the business, and finally, a short discussion on the future. If the new

employee is not fluent in English, use a translator. Onboarding then shifts to the employee's direct supervisor and could include:

- Review of the Code of Conduct or Employee Handbook
- Expectations on things like cab cleanliness, what to wear, smoking or chewing policy, cell phone policy, and when to punch in or out
- Safety procedures like the location of fire extinguishers
- Machinery maintenance expectations

As you can see, orientation is pretty easy to get rolling. It just requires being deliberate about showing employees the resources needed to do their job. Onboarding, however, requires both preparation and consistency among owners and managers on the plan for new employees.

Agriculture businesses are amazing at adopting technology and tools that increase effectiveness. Consider onboarding and orientation two of those tools. They are not a comprehensive approach to training. But they do represent a great start to an investment in your employees and, therefore, in the future of your business.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barb is a partner in GROW: The Family Business Advisors. She is a family business consultant, working with farm families and

management teams to help them keep their business healthy and the people happy. Barb can be reached at 269-382-0539 or barb.dartt@growthefamily.biz

The opinions stated herein are not necessarily those of GreenStone Farm Credit Services.

¹ 2013 State of the Industry Report, American Society of Training and Development, January 2014 and The Corporate Learning Factbook, Bersin by Deloitte, January 2014

² 2013 Employee Benefits, Society for Human Resource Development, December 2013

³ Wages and Benefits for Farm Employees, Iowa State University Extension & Outreach, March 2012