

Winning with staff when things are stressful on farm

In our rural environment over the next few months during calving and mating it's pretty much flat tack from dawn until dusk. This stressful time can be the catalyst of tension between employer and employee.

First season together is always the hardest...

Tension in the ranks is far more likely to happen between employers and workers just going into their first season together. These teams have come together usually on June 1st and had a fairly quiet period up until calving. This is an untested relationship where neither side has fully got a handle on the other and how they work and react when they are flat out busy, tired, cold and wet and sometimes (since it is winter) feeling a bit under the weather. So within a few weeks of beginning together calving begins and it is all on and it is then that cracks begin to appear and temperaments get frayed and problems arise.

Established teams can still have issues...

The second and rarer but still occurring situation is the established second season plus relationship - both thinking about how they are going to "put up with each other" knowing how bad it's got in previous years.

Some simple suggestions on what could help...

Set clear expectations

From day one you should set clear expectations regarding behavior standards on farm and make sure you have a newly signed employment agreement.

As part of your induction process for new employees spell out to them how the farm runs and how you expect people to behave on farm. Be clear about issues like how machinery is treated, what the on farm vehicle speeds are, what systems and routines you follow are, how stock are to be treated, i.e. no shouting at or hitting animals, set clear rules about how you want to be spoken to. A simple chat will be sufficient something like

"Here's how I expect staff to behave on the farm, I'm approachable with any issue but only if you keep calm and civil, may sound obvious but I like to let people know so that when we're busy and a bit tired during calving the standards clear – ok?"

These clear boundaries mean staff know the rules, they understand what is expected of them and therefore can not be surprised when pulled up if they breach them.

If you have these things place already a reminder of these practices is also a good idea before calving starts.

Raise issues early

If you have an issue, bring it up promptly don't let a matter fester because then, when you do eventually bring it up (and you will), you will not be able to deal with it as constructively as you would have earlier and that will prevent you from getting a best result outcome.

Also do not be afraid to step into a "performance management" mode if behaviours get out of line as following up clear boundaries with appropriate actions reinforces standards and discourages the person who might just be "trying it on" with you to see what they can get away with. Always do this with a clam and positive manner and always look for a way to help the employee succeed – remember it may be a skill deficit that simply needs some coaching and training from you.

Good communication

Right from week one set up a weekly coffee meeting on a Monday or Tuesday where you and the staff member talk farming – what you are each doing that week, what is needing to be done and what needs to be caught up from last week, covering why that didn't happen last week as planned. Good communication means understanding and accountability, which should get good results. These meetings will allow the employer to know that their employee is on track and the employee will know what is expected of them at all times.

Don't React

Never ever react in a heat of the moment situation if you can possibly avoid it. Do not ever let yourself be baited. Just walk away in need and make sure that when you deal with the matter that you have calmed yourself down and can just deal with the work issue without derailing your management process by any actions that can give the employee grounds for complaint. This requires some ability to keep calm but keeps you, the employer, in control of what happens on your farm – and remember it is your business so you are entitled to call the shots so long as you are asking employees to do tasks that are legal, safe and within their ability.

Look After yourself and your staff

Lastly, to the best of your ability within the demands of the season – look after your own wellbeing. This will help you manage the stress better and be able to cope when things do go wrong. Sort out some good relief staff to cover if someone gets hurt or to ill to work. Make sure that you encourage yourself and your team to have water with them and keep hydrated – statistics show that dehydrated people are more likely to suffer a lower back injury (Stat sourced by Vital Care Ltd), so prevent risks like that.

And most importantly, keep those weekly farm based meetings going, communication is the number one key to a successful working relationship.

**Any questions or if you would like help with any concerns feel free to call John at CooperAitken, 07 889 7153, creating freedom in your business.
First discussion is FREE**