



Taking Care of your Farm Staff, by Joe Rowe, Managing Director of Farm Solutions

I recently attended AgriScot with my Scotland Regional Manager, Mark Allen. I always find AgriScot to be a well organised, friendly and informal show. Well done to all involved.

On our stand on the day, we talked to farmers about their labour needs. At the end of the day, we realised we had spoken to very few potential workers. Usually at such shows there is an equal mix of farmers and workers seeking jobs, but not this year. It is not just Scotland; it was the same all over the UK and Ireland this year. The fact is that skilled dairy farm workers are becoming extremely difficult to find.

My advice to our dairy clients and to Scottish dairy farmers in general is: if you have good staff working on your dairy farm, consider how you can retain them for as long as possible. Taking care of them is in your own interest.

Here are some ideas that we see working successfully.

- Review their pay to make sure they are on the market rate. The worker is not responsible for the poor milk price. Don't wait until you get the notice.
- Allow and encourage staff to do some off-farm training that is applicable to your farm. For some workers, self-development is important to them and is useful for your farm.
- Spend time coaching them on skills you want done well on your farm. Do this in a positive manner.
- Notice what they are doing right and tell them, don't wait until they make a mistake to notice. The most regular comment we get at interviews is that the former farmer employer never spoke to me only when I did something wrong!
- If you want respect for yourself and your farm, give them respect for where they are and how they contribute. The days of "they are lucky I am giving them a job" is in the past.
- If you need to correct or discipline, do it in a gentle minimal way with a clear way forward for the worker. Of course, say what needs to be said to improve but don't

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overdo it. Watch for tone, language and the environment that the conversation happens in. Get it wrong and you are a worker short. Humiliation never works in the longer term.

- Create a positive atmosphere on the farm as much as possible, a few laughs and a bit of fun is great for the feel good factor about their job. An occasional lunch or few pints some evening or weekend is sometimes useful.

We are often invited to get involved in a farm staff situation when relations have broken down and a worker has left or has been sacked. This situation also creates stress on other staff as no one likes the hassle going on in their work place. It can unsettle even the best and long term staff and this is not in your business interest so take time to settle everything down again in a positive manner.

We often discuss with our farmer clients about the staff management skills that are required. Some farmers would admit that they are not experienced or particularly interested in this and want to just get on with farming. One of the benefits of how Farm Solutions operate is that we have an ongoing relationship with the worker and the farmer as the worker remains on our payroll. This gives us the opportunity to add value to the farm by improving communications and assisting the farmer in managing the farm staff well.

If we need to have that “difficult” conversation with the worker we can have it in a manner that we can all benefit from and move forward quickly afterwards. This allows a greater chance that the relationship between the farmer and the worker is not damaged.

In summary, I would suggest that fair pay, a respectful and positive atmosphere, good communications and a few laughs is the key to retaining good hardworking, dairy staff. Consider how well your farm rates on these points and make a few small changes if necessary before losing good people.

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