

by
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CREATING A HIGH-YIELD WORK ENVIRONMENT

Rural Ontario's skilled worker shortage makes strong human resources management a must.

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More than 40 per cent of farmers listed having to compete for talent as their top human resources concern, the Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council found.

Hiring, retaining and managing employees is an ongoing challenge for ag businesses.

Indeed, Canadian farmers lost almost \$3-billion worth of sales in 2018 because they couldn't fill their employment vacancies, the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) found in its "Labour Market Forecast to 2029" report. That figure is up from \$1.5 billion four years earlier.

And more than 40 per cent of farmers listed having to compete for talent as their top human resources (HR) concern, CAHRC found.

Given these recruiting challenges, agricultural employers may put extra effort into retention. But what happens when members of the farm team bump heads?

Well, that's where HR comes in, Portia MacDonald-Dewhirst, executive director of CAHRC, told *Better*

Farming. "Farmers are in business because they're passionate about food and agricultural production. Often, they have less knowledge about human resource management."

Conflict is a complex concept, Carol Bendo told *Better Farming*. She's a 30-year veteran of the HR industry who manages a 10-person HR department for Mucci Farms, an international greenhouse grower headquartered in Kingsville, Ont.

"Life is stressful," she said. "There's a lot going on in people's lives, between sandwich generations and cultural dynamics – the list goes on and on. Before you understand conflict, you have to understand its social roots."

Many times, conflict arises out of stress, high work demands or personal issues, she added.

Farmers will likely need training to become real experts at conflict resolu-

tion, but Bendo and MacDonald-Dewhirst offered up a few pointers.

Andrea De Groot, the managing director of the Ontario Pork Industry Council (OPIC), Mary Barefoot, a director of HR services with AgCareers.com, and Rachael Powell, one of AgCareers.com's HR solutions data analysts, shared their insights, too. (AgCareers.com is a Farms.com company, as is *Better Farming*.)

So, let's dig in and see what they have to say.

Focusing on the facts

Often, conflict in the workplace opens with an explosion.

Tempers are hot, voices are loud and the emotional shrapnel is flying at bullet speed.

It's essential to snuff out the battle before it expands into a war.

"Get all the sides of the story; deal with the facts," Bendo said. "And do

it as soon as you hear about (the conflict). Don't wait."

The individual in charge of HR should interview the conflicting parties separately and then speak with any witnesses.

If any managers or supervisors oversee the employees, they should provide their understanding of the situation, too.

"Basically, you want to reconstruct what happened," Bendo said. "You then draw a conclusion based on your findings. If it's a simple matter, you go back to the people involved and have a conversation with them. If it's more complex, you make sure you have everything in writing."

No matter how the process plays out, the parties involved could be upset when presented with the HR manager's findings, Bendo said. Employers should allow room for the workers to express their emotions, as long as it's within reason, she added.

Then, the employer can begin implementing corrective actions so the situation doesn't repeat itself.

Leadership and respect

The person who administers corrective actions should also oversee the workers' day-to-day activities. This responsibility may not win the supervisor any popularity contests, but it may earn him or her the employees' respect and might make his or her management role easier.

Unfortunately, the transition from worker to supervisor can be a bumpy one.

"A problem we often see is that a person in a supervisory role was promoted and still wants to be friends with his or her former co-workers," Barefoot told *Better Farming*.

"Often, people will promote whoever is best at a particular job, but there's a difference between being good at something and being good at teaching those skills to someone else."

Leaders must refine their skills through experience and training, Bendo said. It's not a talent people inherently possess.

A range of legal, administrative and policy responsibilities go along

with holding a supervisory role, too. As ag companies grow, so do those workloads and the importance of completing these tasks correctly.

Policies

The policies a leader enforces act as a sort of guidebook for employees to follow.

If management clearly defines and explains its policies, it's easier for an employee to recognize how he or she is expected to act on the farm.

Clear policies "are also important for employee retention and establishing a strong workplace culture," MacDonald-Dewhirst added.

Until expanding their teams, producers often hadn't needed to write down explanations or descriptions of their workers' duties, De Groot, told *Better Farming*. De Groot and the team at OPIC offer producers free HR advice, training and resources through the council's ag-centric toolkits.

"There's often a lot of confusion," De Groot said. "A lot of times, the



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“Gone are the days when everybody helped out on their neighbour’s farm while they were growing up,” Mary Barefoot said.

policy system (on the farm) was, ‘Dad says,’ and that has a heavy impact because producers are hiring people who didn’t come from that type of culture.

“As the ag workforce becomes more diverse, we’ve developed the need to conduct ourselves in a way that is more consistent with broader workplace standards.”

Policies and procedures should govern every level of a farm’s corporate hierarchy, including those individuals in top management positions.

Often, conflict arises from inter-generational disagreement, De Groot added. As farm leadership moves from parent to child, ideas about how best to run the operation may clash.

That tension may trickle down into the workforce and damage the employees’ morale.

Policies and procedures help resolve the conflict before it occurs, De Groot said.

Communication and education

Talking about a person’s expectations – or writing them down – helps both the employer and the employee ensure that they’re meeting each others’ needs.

That communication should start the first time they meet, Barefoot said.

“If, after meeting and speaking

with a person you decide that he or she is the right person for (your operation), it’s critical that you retain” that individual, she explains.

In all likelihood, a new hire won’t have the exact skill set a producer needs to fill his or her open position, so some training will be required. On a big farm, a supervisor might handle the coaching. On a smaller-scale operation, the farmer may take on this responsibility.

“Gone are the days when everybody helped out on their neighbour’s farm while they were growing up,” Barefoot added.

These days, it’s less about a lack of applicants and more about a lack of skills, Powell told *Better Farming*.

“Positions requiring technical skills showed up in our HR reviews as being some of the positions that are the most difficult to fill,” she said. “It seems that tech fields just aren’t the hot majors for (young adults). They’re taught that they should earn four-year degrees. Sometimes, a four-year degree isn’t what employers need.”

And those individuals who possess the necessary skill sets aren’t necessarily moving to rural Ontario to seek work, MacDonald-Dewhirst added.

Farm operations are expanding.

Almost 60 per cent of Canadian agribusinesses believe their workforce

numbers will increase over the next two years, the Canadian edition of AgCareers’ 2019 “Agribusiness HR Review” reports.

The share of Canadians who live in rural areas continues to decline, however. The official numbers are hazy, but MacDonald-Dewhirst suggested that producers may be looking to hire more people than the number who are moving to farm communities.

“There is and continues to be a workforce shortage,” MacDonald-Dewhirst said.

“Industry employers are struggling to find and keep enough qualified workers to ensure the success of their businesses.”

The future of farming

To gain and retain talent, farmers and owners of ag businesses must be willing to adapt.

“Something that keeps HR professionals up at night is the question, ‘How am I going to compete with other employers for talent?’” Powell said.

“Some of the most common techniques they employ are increases in compensation, bonuses and benefits. It seems that the next generation of farm workers expects farm culture to fall in line more closely with that of other industries.” **BF**