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MY PHILOSOPHY AS A FARM EMPLOYER

by J. Caldwell

Farm Owner, Scotland

In order to understand my philosophy as a farm employer, I feel it would be better to let you know the scope and nature of my farming activities. In Ayrshire, Scotland, I am in partnership with my wife and son on 450 acres of very good, arable land. 400 acres of this is rented from a landlord who owns large estates, not only in Ayrshire, but in many parts of the United Kingdom. The remaining 50 acres are owned. My holdings consist of a number of farms which have been amalgamated as former tenants retired, or as they became uneconomic through land being lost to industrial development. The farm is at present on the edge of an industrial area. Further loss of land to this is always a possibility. Thirty miles from the main unit, I have a hill sheep farm of 930 acres and this is farmed in conjunction with the main unit. My main enterprises are: 120 dairy cows with the bull calves all being retained for beef. All heifer calves are kept for replacements.

Cropping consists of 110 acres of spring barley, 15 acres of winter wheat, 15 acres of main crop potatoes - largely sold locally, direct to the consumer, and 5 acres of turnips for sheep feeding.

On my hill sheep farm we have 500 black faced ewes which lamb during the month of April and 60 beef cows which are single suckled and rearing Charolais cross calves.

The labour force, in addition to my son and myself, is three men on the main farm and one shepherded stockman on the hill farm. On the present labour force, one of the men has been on the farm for 20 years, another for 14 years, and I would think that my philosophy as a farm employer has at least been successful in my eyes. I think I should also give you the background of the employment position of Scottish farmers. In Scotland 55% of farmers employ no labour at all. A further 30% employ only family labour which leaves about 15% of farmers which have any hired labour at all. It is against this background you should consider what I am saying.

Up until 5 years ago, I was involved only in a very limited acreage of 250 acres; more or less, just a large family farm. When I became involved in a larger area, I tried to maintain the same relationship with the staff as it had always been, namely that I should be able to do any job that came along. In this way you can establish a working relationship which will withstand the many stresses which obviously arise in any farm business. The true test of a good employer is when one has a staff vacancy to fill that there will always be at least someone who will come to you looking for a job because they know either you, or your farm, or have been recommended to them by someone who does. How does one go about creating a situation when this is so? Firstly, I feel that the job must be made as attractive as possible. Hard manual labour must be kept to a minimum. This means that mechanization

must go beyond what can be justified by sheer economics. If a worker is given good, modern machinery to work with, he will take greater interest in his work and this raises his productivity and gives him greater job satisfaction.

When I started farming, I had less than 50 cows and as the herd grew, the labour force did not. This branch of my farming has required a greater amount of capital spent on it over the years than any other. We have graduated over the years from cows milked in stalls with buckets, to modern loose housing setup with cows milked in a rotary parlour. As my herd grew in size and the other stock increased, it became evident that hay making had to be replaced by silage in towers - all to cut down on physical effort in producing maintenance of the stock. We often hear of various criteria which apply to test the efficiency of dairying. The principal ones in Scotland appear to be:

- How many cows can we milk per man
- How many cows per acre

These 2 yearsticks are of very little interest to me. Much more relevant, I would suggest, are how many gallons of milk does one get in an hour - how many gallons of milk per grazing acre.

There is few more daunting prospects than to face a man 7 days per week with 150 cows to milk and expect the job to be done properly and to have the man to remain in your employment or retain his sanity for any length of time. I have always believed that milking should be a team job, with all members of the staff involved at some time or other and with my cows, this is the hub around which the rest of my farm evolves. Creating a sense of team work is more important than many other aspects of being a good employer. With the exception of the shepherd, all the employees have at some time or other to be involved with the cows. This enables you to plan adequate labour leisure time for the dairy staff.

I have always considered that housing is one of the key factors in establishing your reputation as a good employer. Although I rent most of my land, I have spent a good deal of capital providing modern housing for the staff - the landlord generally providing the site at a nominal rent and the farmer building the house. I have also spent considerable time and effort modernizing the houses which do, in fact, belong to me. In Scotland, and in England in fact, we have a system called the tied house - this is the house which goes with the job. The present Government have expressed an intention to do away with this form of housing which appears to contradict the principles of the present Government. It is not my policy to pay the highest wages that are going in agriculture, but I am always assured that my salaries keep in line with those in similar situations. We are governed by a Wages Board which sets the minimum wage which one can pay to agricultural workers, but the good employer is always paying away above the minimum rate. In Scotland we are faced at the moment with this great oil boom and the labour supply in agriculture, as in many other industries, has become critical. It is, therefore, most

important that one pays an adequate salary and provides conditions of employment that will attract the right type of staff. It is unfortunate that in our industry the busy season occurs at a time when the rest of the community are on holiday and schools are closed. It is essential that any good employer should arrange holidays for staff when it is convenient for the staff and not just when it is possible, and when one is planning holidays for staff, always plan it well ahead and discuss it with them. As all my business decisions are taken after discussion with my partners - my wife and my son - it is always worthwhile taking time to acquaint staff and those who are responsible for getting effect of your decisions, with a good explanation of what the decisions are and why they were taken.

I hope the facts that I have briefly presented to you will give you some food for thought and I will be prepared to answer any questions which come up.

In conclusion, I would say that one of the greatest advantages of agriculture is that the person or persons who are providing the capital are also those who are making the management decisions.

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