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RESEARCH FINDINGS ON FARM EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

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Concern for the relationship between employers and employees in non-agricultural industries and the accompanying development of the personnel function as a major concern in company organization reached full bloom in the middle 40's. The movement has been gaining impetus since that time with the behavioral sciences playing a role of increasing importance [11, pp. 811-816].

Evidence of farmer's concern with human relations appeared somewhat later. During the 30's farm labor was relatively easy to obtain. The main concern was to use it efficiently. The labor market tightened during and after World War II resulting in a general concern of how to become competitive for the services of people. One of the early textbook references to farm labor relations was by Taylor [18, p. 335] in the middle 40's. In the chapter on labor and capital management a section is devoted to "Developing Initiative, Goodwill, Cooperation and Respect". During the 50's and 60's the interest in attracting, motivating and keeping people in agricultural employment continued to increase. Scientists developed theories on labor relations and put them to empirical tests through research. The challenge in the preparation of this paper has been to review this research as it applies to agriculture attempting to put the findings into a perspective that might be of value to farmer employers and employees.

Functions of Personnel Management

Perhaps the place to start is with an examination of the functions of personnel management. Based on an extensive examination of the literature, Roche [15, pp. 13-14] has identified the following 10 functions of personnel management:

- (1) Planning manpower requirements
- (2) Maintaining personnel records
- (3) Setting up organizational structure
- (4) The hiring process
- (5) Training and development
- (6) Wage and salary administration
- (7) Motivation and discipline
- (8) Communication
- (9) Health and safety
- (10) Employer-employee relations

Planning Manpower Requirements

Most of the problems in planning manpower requirements are with the businesses that are increasing in size through the adoption of new technology in the forms of buildings and equipment. Frequently, the number of units handled per man will increase rapidly with the change in technology. Manpower planning must take into consideration both the quality of personnel and the design of jobs which the personnel will be expected to perform [15, p. 28].

Roche points out that there are many factors which should be considered in designing a job. These include: (1) principles of organization; (2) level of technology; (3) the labor union practices; (4) the abilities of present personnel; (5) available labor supply; (6) the psychological and social needs of man; and (7) the interaction requirement among jobs.

One of the difficult problems in manpower planning is in estimating how much of a turnover there will be in labor. Observation indicates that larger farms, employing as many as 15 to 25 men, have less difficulty dealing with labor turnover than the 2 to 4 man farms. Perhaps the reason is that when a two man farm loses one man he loses half of his labor force and faces an almost impossible situation. On the other hand, a farm with 20 workers can afford to pad his labor force by a man or two whenever he has an opportunity so that when someone leaves the stress is barely felt. Unavailability of people trained and experienced in performing agricultural skills is a serious problem for the planner. Also the surge of technological innovation has made it necessary to constantly retrain those that are available.

Michigan State University has, for several years, been sponsoring a training course for dairy workers. The enrollees have been mostly young people, many of whom do not have a farm background. The program has enjoyed enough success to prompt the suggestion that a more general effort toward manpower training is needed.

Maintaining Personnel Records

Obviously, the need for a system of personnel records is less important for the small farm than for the large one. Certainly the multiman business with more than 2 to 4 employees could find such records of value.

The information included in personnel records would be such things as date hired, background information, successive jobs held in the company with the dates of promotions and wage increases. If one could have a summary of this information for each of 10 employees on one sheet, it would make the job of evaluation and promotion much simpler. It also allows one to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing how much each employee is paid, what the range and wages for the job classification are, and how long it has been since the employee's wages were increased. If the time comes when agricultural labor is generally organized into unions, the keeping of personnel records will be required to establish seniority status, level of competency and other comparative data on personnel.

In his study of personnel management practices on dairy farms, Roche [15, p. 50] noted a distinct lack of personnel records being kept on dairy farms. It was suggested that this area be examined closely to develop recommendations on the kind of records to keep and how to use the information in the personnel management program.

Setting Up Organizational Structure

Organization as related to personnel management of an enterprise refers to the relationships between various parts of the business and, particularly, the relationships between the individuals who are responsible for the operation of the business. These relationships in setting up the organization require careful consideration of the goals and objectives which are formulated during the planning process. This relationship of objectives to organization has been clearly stated by Dale [8, p. 23] who says:

The organization structure is a mechanism designed to help in achieving the goals of the enterprise. However small the organization, it must start by determining its objectives, for the objectives, for the resources of any organization are limited and must be utilized if the company is to survive and prosper. This requires a formulation of objectives and assignment of responsibilities. The allocation of responsibilities is essential, even if the organization consists of only one man, for he must divide his time as effectively as possible. The allocation of responsibilities becomes even more important where there are more than one person in the organization ...

Departmentalization is the process of setting up groups of functions and activities or tasks, for the purpose of assigning them as responsibilities of particular positions or people. McFarland states that the primary purpose of departmentalization is to subdivide the organization structure vertically so that executives and managers may specialize within the restricted ranges of activity [13, p. 342].

If I may add a personal observation, it would be that there are many of the farms that are modernizing the expanding into what we presume will be the farms of the future which could afford to give much more attention to organizing the structure of their businesses. Too many farms simply grow with one man in charge who makes all of the decisions in an autocratic manner. In his mind there may have been many of the elements of organization referred to here. However, unless recognized lines of authority and responsibility have been established, the management of the business may become chaotic whenever the manager is unavailable.

The Hiring Process

Typically, farmers have not given much attention to this part of personnel management. In the first place, they may have a work force of only 1 to 5 men and some of them can remember every man

that ever worked for them. With an increase in size of business, however, the job of recruitment and hiring becomes more difficult. The Small Business Administration [18, p. 5] points out that sound employment recruitment practices demand that:

- (1) Short and long-term manpower needs of organization are considered, including the probable turnover of labor. Job descriptions and job specifications should be established.
- (2) A regular recruitment program should be organized, bearing in mind that principles of selection involve having a large number of recruits from which to pick the most suitable. The labor supply will, of course, influence the number of applicants.
- (3) All sources of recruitment should be tapped so that the final selection can be made from the total pool of applicants.

Having an application form can be of value in recruitment of workers. In an article written for Hoards's Dairyman [5], I suggested that an application for prospective employees was useful and we also constructed a personnel interview checklist and a reference checklist for farm employers to use in their recruitment program. Hoard's Dairyman has made these forms available to farmers for a nominal charge.

It is my observation that Michigan dairy farmers frequently are interested in employment agreements to use in hiring farm workers. Armstrong [1] studied this subject in 1969. He came up with examples of employment agreements for full-time workers as well as applications for employment and a checklist for interviewing applicants and references. It was pointed out that whether the employment agreement was oral or written, it is highly desirable that it be understood by both parties.

Training and Development

One of the distinct contrasts between farms and other small businesses is that farm work requires a much wider range of skills. Also, the difficulty of training is increased by the involvement of many biological processes for which workers have to have a feel if they are going to become valuable employees on the farm. Recognizing when an animal is in heat or is about to give birth may seem simple to the person who has lived with animals all of his life, but it requires a lot of training for the uninitiated. The same could be said about observing illness among animals or diseases among plants.

Farmers with only 2 to 5 laborers find that one of their most difficult and probably most neglected jobs is that of training employees. Frequently, they say they want to hire experienced employees which is about the same as saying they don't want to take time to train employees. Another common observation among farmers is that "I just got him trained and he took a job elsewhere".

It is not uncommon for a farmer who is training a worker to become impatient and this frequently puts a severe stress on personal relations between the worker and the trainer, making the worker a ripe prospect for changing employers as soon as he learns how to do his job.

The senior partner in a large dairy farm business was asked "what kind of people do you attempt to recruit?" The answer was that he kept an advertisement in a farm paper continually and he occasionally received replies that appeared to be worth following up. This farm employed about 25 workers. It was economical to pad the work force by a man or two as insurance against the time when someone decided to quit. He also stated that in hiring milkers he did not want ex-dairymen who had learned to milk on their own. He preferred people who had no milking experience. He believed it was easier to train a milker who did not have to unlearn undesirable practices.

One of the points stressed by many personnel management experts is that training is not a one-time job. Rather, there is a need for constant review of a training program and continual communication with workers on job methods. Frequently, it is possible to get valuable suggestions from experienced employees on work methods which can be communicated to other employees to the benefit of both the employees and the organization. Yoder [21, p. 12.7] lists certain principles of training that are generally recognized in industry and these are worth citing here:

- (1) There is a tendency toward training individuals rather than groups. Sometimes on a farm there is no group involved in doing a particular job, but there are other kinds of farm work such as harvesting fruits and vegetables where group training is a possibility.
- (2) An increasing proportion of training is being done by foremen and fellow employees rather than by a formal training staff.
- (3) The part of the learner is growing more dynamic than static (i.e., there is more participation on the part of the learner and this is desirable).
- (4) It is generally observed that there is a better selection of trainees.
- (5) Training is becoming more specific rather than more general. This certainly must apply on a farm, but we must add that there are many more skills to be learned by farm workers than by most industrial workers.

In summary, I would make the following observations. Dairy farmers, particularly those in the 75 to 120 cow range, and other middle-sized farm operations are generally somewhat negligent about training of workers. Having untrained people on the staff frequently invites the kind of personal criticism of workers which results in a high rate of turnover.

There may be some possibility for certain common types of farms to organize and sponsor a training program for workers where it would be possible to hire an expert trainer. One of the problems farmers have in training people is that their lack of experience and training and their failure to realize the complicated nature of the skills that they expect workers to learn.

Wage and Salary Administration

It is frequently pointed out that the kind of response a farm employer would like from his employees cannot be purchased but rather must be earned through the development of a good relationship with the employees. These things include loyalty, cooperativeness, productive performance, willingness to accept responsibility and attitude toward the job. John Trocke [20, p. 72] points out that money itself is not a motivator, but managers must recognize it as a motivating tool to be used by people in meeting the needs which do motivate.

Yoder, et al [21, pp. 16.1-16.8] point out that the first step in establishing a wage program is to develop job descriptions and specifications. When the various jobs are related to one another within the organization they form what is known as the job structure classification. Wage structure is job structure that has been priced in dollars and cents. As was pointed out in a previous section, the job description for the workers on farms of fewer than 5 people have to become rather all inclusive, because the work is such that each worker must perform several tasks. The method by which farmers tend to arrive at a fair wage is to stay in line with the wages paid in the community for similar type work. The amount paid is tempered according to the value of fringe benefits including paid vacation, sick-pay, life insurance, health and accident insurance, hospitalization, medical and surgical insurance, bonuses and retirement or pension plans as well as the personal attributes of the individual.

It has been pointed out that if one is to include fringe benefits in the wage package, the employer should attempt to consider these on a cost-benefit basis [7, p. 5]. This is not as simple as it may seem. For example, most nonfarm labor contracts include pension plans, unemployment insurance (which are supplementary to federal and state social security and unemployment benefits). The company is required by agreement to contribute to the fund on behalf of the employees to support these insurance schemes. It is extremely difficult to explain the benefits to employees who may put a higher premium on this week's paycheck than on retirement income. At best, there is a tendency for some fringe benefits to be valued by employees at less than cost to the employers. Consequently, the benefits may not help the employer compete for employee services in a way that is commensurate with their costs.

Nonfarm employers frequently operate under a detailed written contract with labor organizations. Most farmers have no more than a loose verbal agreement with their employees. It might be desirable to have a written memorandum of agreement. Whether the agreement is written or verbal, it should be specific on such items as period of agreement, wage rates, hours to be worked, time off for paid vacation and sick leave, fringe benefits, the kind of work to be done, the care of housing on the part of the employee, termination notice on the part of either party, grievance procedures and agreement renewal procedures [1].

It has been suggested that most farm employers should give their employees an accounting at the end of each pay period. It is suggested that in addition to the amount of cash wages, the employee be given a cumulative summary of the value of fringe benefits. Otherwise, he has little basis on which to compare his present employment with other opportunities that may be presented to him [7, p. 10]. Roche [15, p. 118] found that approximately 40 percent of the dairymen contacted in his sample of large dairy farms operated under a bonus and incentive program. Shapley [16, p. 5] found 51 percent.

Many farmers have indicated that they would like to operate under an incentive wage plan provided they could find a system over which they could exercise adequate control. Nine basic principles which were developed from the experience of the farmers and others who tried different plans have been listed as follows [7, p. 4]:

- (1) Plans should be aimed at rewarding the employee, in a particular way, for working in the interest of the employer.
- (2) The plan should be based on performance that is largely within the control of the employee.
- (3) Computations used in determining the amount of the bonus should be simple and understood by both parties.
- (4) An incentive payment should be made at the time the employee has met specified requirements or very soon thereafter.
- (5) Plans should not encourage practices on the part of the employee which are uneconomical to the employer.
- (6) The employee should avoid bonus incentive plans which hamper him in making sound management decisions.
- (7) Bonus incentive plans should not be aimed at shifting a part of the financial risk of the farm operation to the employee.
- (8) Bonus incentive plans will not substitute for good labor relation practices.

- (9) To avoid misunderstandings the plan should be in writing and signed by both parties.

Few cash bonus incentive plans will conform to all of these principles. Perhaps this is the reason farmers frequently discontinue a plan after a trial experience. Armstrong [1, p. 40] points out several examples of incentive payment plans which came to attention in the course of his research.

Motivation and Discipline

Textbooks on personnel management present some interesting theories on motivation. They pretty much agree that the manager's fundamental responsibility in any form of organization is to "get work done through people". This implies that getting work done in an organization is immediately and finally dependent on the behavior of the employees of that organization. Behavior can be simply described as the total response of an individual to various motivating forces. This means that all rational human behavior is caused and people behave as they do because they are responding to forces that have the power to motivate them in some manner or form of action [11, p. 323].

It is a commonly accepted idea that motivational theory starts out with human needs. Maslow [12, ch. 3] provides a systematic classification of human needs that other researchers have widely used in theory building and to test concepts of motivation. He says human needs exist in a hierarchy composed of 5 levels:

- (1) Physical or physiological needs
- (2) Safety and security needs
- (3) Socio needs such as love, affection or friendship
- (4) Esteem and self-respect
- (5) Self-actualization.

The lowest order of needs are psychological ones like hunger, sex, thirst and so forth. Self-actualization is the highest level of needs and is one most difficult to describe. It may be thought of as the need to "become what one is capable of becoming". Unlike the needs which can be satisfied, self-actualization is never fully satisfied.

It is further stated that individuals move through the levels in the hierarchy in the order listed. As individuals satisfy needs at one level, the next higher level of needs asserts itself to occupy the individual's energies and efforts. Individuals will vary in the progress they make along the continuum, and it is more difficult, as a person moves towards the ultimate goals of self-actualization. The types of things that satisfy the needs for personal growth and self-actualization include such things as achievements, recognition, responsibility and advancement.

McGregor [14] has labeled two basic ideas about motivation and people as Theory X and Theory Y. The manager who fits into the Theory X group leans toward an organization climate of close control, centralized authority, autocratic leadership and minimum worker participation in the decision process. The acceptance of this combination is based on the following assumptions about human behavior:

- (1) The average man dislikes work and will avoid it to the extent he can.
- (2) Stemming from this, most people have to be forced or threatened by punishment to get them to make the effort necessary to accomplish organizational goals.
- (3) The average individual is basically passive and, therefore, prefers to be directed rather than to assume any risk or responsibility. Above all, he prefers security.

The manager who fits into the Theory Y concept operates with a different set of assumptions regarding human behavior. These assumptions are:

- (1) Work is as natural to man as play and rest and, therefore, is not avoided.
- (2) Self-motivation and inherent satisfaction in work will be forthcoming in situations where the individual is committed to organizational goals. Hence, coercion is not the only form of influence that can be used to motivate.
- (3) Commitment is a crucial factor in motivation and when an individual is committed to attain a goal he has helped to set, he will feel rewarded by the attainment.
- (4) The average individual learns to accept and even seek responsibility given the proper environment.
- (5) Contrary to popular stereotypes, an ability to be creative and innovative in the solution of organization problems is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population.
- (6) In modern business and organization, human intellectual potentiality are just partially realized.

The current consensus seems to be that in organizations having a stable environment and using employees of low level skills, the more nonparticipative, autocratic kind of climate appears to be effective. In rapidly changing firms, however, with highly educated and skilled people, more democratic forms of management get the results.

Haimann and Scott [10, p. 4405] believe that 20 or 30 years from now autocratic bureaucracy will be nothing more than a curiosity. Forces bringing about this change and requiring a more democratic climate are technology, education and professionalization of management.

Roche [15, p. 131] points out that he was unable to find much literature pertaining to motivation of farm employees. Some agricultural researchers, among them Beckett [2], Frank [9], and Shapley [16], have used the theory of motivation based on human needs in the development of personnel management courses for farm personnel. For the most part, however, organizational aspects of motivation have not yet been applied to agriculture.

Communication

Effective communications is an important tool in maintaining good employer-employee relations. Although the number of workers on farms is usually very small and there is plenty of opportunity for contact between the manager and the worker, there is considerable evidence of lack of communication on important aspects of labor relations. Personal experience suggests that this is particularly true on many family operated farms. Lack of communication leads to frustration. If it is allowed to go too long, it breaks up what could have been a happy complementary relationship between a son, long on muscle and short on capital and experience, and a father with capital and experience who needs to take it easy physically.

There is little to be gained at this point from going into a complicated explanation of communications. In the discussion of motivation, the democratic approach was described. The effective method involved having the worker help to set goals and decide how to attain those goals. Such a system will work only if people at all levels are willing to communicate.

Health and Safety

Farming is a dangerous business. This is indicated by the high cost of workmen's compensation insurance on farm workers, which on Michigan dairy and livestock farms is \$7.87 per \$100 payroll. The death rate in agriculture in 1967 was 67 per 100,000 workers. This compares with 18 for all nonfarm industries. It is probably that one factor in the high accident rate in agriculture is the fact that workers are not generally specialized. They work at all kinds of jobs from driving trucks and tractors to handling livestock. For each of these jobs there's probably a long list of precautions that should be observed, but which are frequently overlooked. Someone has said a good safety program is no accident.

Armstrong [1, pp. 330-331] suggests there are a few musts that should be considered in organizing a safety program:

- (1) It must have top management approval, sanction and support.
- (2) Responsibility for safety must rest with supervisory personnel.
- (3) Safety must be given equally important consideration with other factors of production.
- (4) Provision must be made for prompt action in the elimination of mechanical and personal hazards.

Employer-Employee Relations

Satisfied farm employees, when asked why they like to work for their present employers, will say many things. The gist of what they say will include the following [7, pp. 11-14]:

- (1) He treats his employees as human beings.
- (2) He plans to work reasonable hours.
- (3) He pays competitive wages when you consider the value of the fringe benefits.
- (4) He is reasonable about time off, sick leave, vacation and so forth.

The last three of these are definable and are generally understood. The first is more difficult to define. In one way or another we have alluded to it in various sections of this report. The principles involved are psychological. Since man's psychological make-up and background differ, the methods that please one sometimes do not please another. There are, however, some characteristics of personal treatment to which people tend to react favorably. These apply to any people-to-people relationships, whether it be father and son, husband and wife, or employer-employee:

- (1) People like to be treated with dignity and understanding by their associates. Treated with dignity and understanding, they will tend to reflect dignity and understanding. People do not generally want to be pampered nor do they want to be treated as just another social security number.
- (2) The first and early impressions tend to be lasting. Before an employee is hired, the conditions of employment should be discussed in detail. There should be an agreement on wages, hours, overtime, fringe benefits and supervision. The employee's wife should be included in the discussion and her opinions should not be ignored.

- (3) People will not tolerate harsh words. When they do something wrong, even if they recognize the error was theirs, they must feel forgiven. Everyone makes mistakes. Stupidity is a trait people recognize in other people, not in themselves. If a reprimand is necessary, it should not be made in the presence of other employees.
- (4) People like to be productive. They require a handy work place and good machinery. Training, farm supervision and involvement of the employee and planning productive work routines are a must. This, plus a well-managed, larger than average specialized farm business, will contribute to productiveness.
- (5) People have a tendency to join a "bandwagon" or to "leave a sinking ship". Give it a clean and orderly appearance. Maintain the optimistic businesslike attitude of a manager who feels that he is in charge and all is well. Give employees the feeling of having had a part in making the business a going concern.
- (6) People like to be encouraged to have ideas and make suggestions. These should not be ignored even if the same idea has occurred to the manager and it has been rejected. Weigh the suggestions with the employee. If it must be rejected, be sure he understands why. If the suggestion is a good one, accept it and give the appropriate recognition. People who are treated with dignity and given responsibility, grow on the job and develop the attitude that encourages them to make useful suggestions.
- (7) People like to feel that they can advance. In previous sections of this paper, I have suggested the desirability of job descriptions. For each job there must be a starting salary and a top salary. Some of the jobs pay better than do others. The worker will be more satisfied if he can see how he can advance both in salary and in responsibility.
- (8) People need training. No two farmers perform all the jobs alike. Farm employers frequently say, "He doesn't know how to do farm work". Really there is no reason why an employee should know how to perform on a new job. He must be shown, allowed to do the job on his own and supervised until he can master it. Training takes much employer or supervisory patience and understanding. It goes without saying that the trainer must be able to perform the job for which he is training someone.
- (9) People like recognition. A "thank you" or a little praise to an employee who gives a little extra on his own initiative or does some task particularly well will generally buy the type of loyalty and motivation that cannot be bought with cash. Both the giver and receiver will experience the kind of respect for each other that makes for good employer-employee relations.

- (10) People like to be requested to do something rather than be ordered to do something. A request can be couched in the terms of a challenge. An order generally cannot.
- (11) People like to feel the sense of belonging. One of the difficult features of farm employer-employee relations is ingiving the employee an opportunity to become a part of the community. They would be happier and less mobile if they can be made to feel at home in their place of employment. They need to have these community ties that are so important to a feeling of happiness and contentment.

All of these suggested ways of maintaining good employer-employee relations are summed up in the Golden Rule -- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Summary

This brief review of the literature on employer-employee relations suggests the need for continued research as well as employer-employee training. In Michigan we believe this is one of the functions of our extension system. John Trocke of our extension staff, with the assistance of Quentin Ostrander, George Stachwick and other members of the district marketing staff, has developed courses along this line and presented them several hundred times to groups of 15 to 30 people. Dr. Allen Shapley has developed a course entitled, "Personnel Management in Agriculture" which has also been presented many times in an agricultural extension setting. Similar courses have been developed in New York and other states. I believe that these experiences supported by adequate research can go a long way towards helping agricultural managers to improve their skills in employer-employee relations.

I would like to add a suggestion which I believe needs emphasis. I observed from my scanning of the literature that there are a great many things to be learned about the psychology of managing people. It is my observation that writers and researchers are directing their efforts largely at managers. This, of course, comes from the same background that produced the frequently used definition, "management is getting things done through people". But what about the people through who these marvelous things get done -- Those whom "theory type managers" want to interest in helping to set and attain the objectives of the firm! I sometimes wonder how many of these people even realize the importance of setting and attaining personal goals, let alone being concerned about the goals of their employers.

I believe the modern manager must recognize that the important element in this turbulent world of ours is people. Unless the management of individual enterprises contribute to their contentment and well being, the definition goes a little flat as will the success of the enterprise. I am sure that the elements of personnel management we have attempted to review have the potential of increased fulfillment for all people. I believe that to realize the full potential we must not forget to educate the people as well as the managers.

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