PRACTICAL TIPS ON MANAGING STAFF FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES

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We have been employing overseas staff since we returned from our OE in 1994. We once dreamed of operating a rural backpackers facility, but now, instead of them paying us to stay on the farm over night, we pay them and they stay for months!

We have been share-milking in Canterbury since 2000; first lower order share-milking and for the past four years, as 50:50 share-milkers. Next season we will be employing nine international staff. We try and employ single staff, ideally each from a different country. This ensures that the trainees have a diverse cultural experience and improve their English. Most of our international staff stay in New Zealand anywhere from two months to two years. They fall into two categories: 1) short term exchangees; and 2) long term immigrants. Both have different aspirations but, in general, offer the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths

• highly motivated
• multi-skilled
• meet seasonal staffing requirements
• enlarges the labour pool from which to recruit staff
• easy to teach, learn your way!

Weaknesses

• some speak minimal English
• short term
• not familiar with New Zealand pasture based farming system
• difficulty in obtaining visas (perception!)
• a substantial amount of time is spent training staff because of the high planned turnover.

Practical tips to manage overseas staff

You need to:

• have an understanding of different cultures
• be tolerant
• be empathetic
• be compassionate
• appreciate how difficult it is to learn a second language
• be patient
• have a G.S.O.H (good sense of humour)!

You can help yourself by:
• creating simple systems that are easy to teach
• documenting systems, eg, plant wash and rotarainer instructions
• developing a farm manual, so that what is mentioned verbally with regard to work
  conditions and farm expectations and systems can be referred to later for clarification
• practicing Pictionary! A picture paints a million words!
• using maps
• writing instructions down
• developing good training methods:
  
The 3 Day Method
• Day 1 - show them how to do it
• Day 2 - watch them do it
• Day 3 - Leave ’em to it! (and check their work!)
• employing staff from different nationalities to ensure they learn English and avoid forming
  “cliquey” groups
• using detailed rosters that tell each staff member what is required of them each day. We link
  specific tasks to a particular shift on the roster, eg, “shifting effluent”
• providing as much variety as possible
• hosting social occasions. We eat together once a week
• encouraging them to be part of your family
• providing opportunities for them to experience Kiwi culture, eg, Crusaders match, school
  concerts, tennis and swimming at the local school, learning to ski - water and snow
• finding out what each staff member’s aspirations are - on a work and personal level - and
  help them to fulfill them
• giving them as much responsibility as they are willing to take
• being contactable and approachable
• laughing!

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Notes:
Conclusion

Employing overseas personnel allows you access to a huge pool of skillful and motivated labour which, if managed successfully, will be a rewarding experience for the farmer and the staff member. These practical tips help us to farm successfully while meeting the aspirations of our overseas staff.