

PRACTICAL TIPS ON MANAGING STAFF FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES

Jeremy Casey and Kim Solly

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!

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.