

Seven steps to better supervision

As farmers become employers we address the basics of staff supervision

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1 Why employ staff?

As businesses grow and expand, it's clear that not all work can be conducted by one individual or one family as in the past. But the decision to hire staff must be accurately costed before you implement it and the business must be able to afford it through the business cycle.

2 What are the benefits?

Hiring staff allows the owner to focus more on the business planning side, which is proven to yield better per-hour returns through:

- Increased time available to research and source new technologies and farm inputs.
- Increased planning / thinking time.
- Better work organisation.
- Time freed up to identify opportunities for the business.

3 What are the fundamentals of staff supervision?

- Work planning and scheduling.
- Leading the team through the work.
- Implementing the plan surrounding the work.
- Control of the work through performance indicators.

Work planning should include short-, medium-, and long-term goals; ie daily, weekly, monthly and year-to-year goals. Work planning should also focus on the planning of outputs and the (staff) resources needed to achieve

them. November and December, not next February and March, is the time to plan spring work and how labour will be sourced for work peaks.

4 How do I motivate staff?

Leading your team through the cycle of work is crucial to success. The supervisor is responsible for letting employees know what is expected of them and inspiring and motivating employees to do good work.

You need to calmly and clearly tell workers what they have to do. Employees must know exactly what their role is. Staff are motivated in different ways and, in many cases, what motivates a business owner might not necessarily motivate the staff member. Communication is a two-way process, so listening to the employee's viewpoint is vital.

All staff invariably want structured work, structured time off and competitive remuneration. Good staff will want to progress in the business or industry. Can you provide this?

5 How do I ensure things stay on track?

Implementing and monitoring the work plan is where proper supervision is most important.

Rosters are essential to implement work flows and when gaps appear at critical times, there should be a backup plan.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) should be set and explained clearly to all staff in any business. This will result in more buy-in from staff on the goals that the business is trying to achieve.

It's important to remember that



Student Hayley Mills and Teagasc lecturer James Brady discuss effective supervision strategies.

when targets are met in a business, there must be a mechanism to recognise the contribution of the workforce beyond basic pay. Equally, when targets are not met, there must be a way to relate this to the employees.

Modern farming practise dictates that the aforementioned KPIs are adhered to at all times. This is the supervisor's job to constantly refer to them and to regularly highlight their importance to the business.

There's no point asking your employee to get more days at grass, for example, if they are not aware of

the value this adds to your business. Why should they care if there is no reference to this from one end of the season to the next?

6 How do I deal with underperformance?

Underperformance of the business can be explained by many different factors in our land-based sectors, not least by weather and prices, which are out of our control. Underperformance of a business can also

result from a supervisor's inability or unwillingness to monitor and control the actions of employees.

Telling an employee in a formal way how monthly targets are being met (or not) is a pattern that many employees are very happy with. This allows for proper supervisory guidance to be given and discussed openly.

The difficult part of supervision is when situations and practises develop, and become established with employees, that are not aligned with the overall goals. Timekeeping and rest periods are common issues

that must be clear from the start and checked regularly to avoid slippage.

Some people in the land-based sector claim they are too busy to supervise staff properly and then wonder why they have a big staff turnover.

If you take on staff to do work and pay them, then it is important that you also give some time to their training and development. If an employee is not properly trained, then underperformance in that area is the supervisor's issue.

7 How important is training?

A good supervisor will teach the employee new skills so that they can carry them out successfully. Training staff can be harder than doing the job yourself, but the payoff down the line is greater because it builds a more resilient group.

Some, maybe a lot, of business owners in the land-based sector need to be better trainers, which requires patience, not a trait that is in huge supply when one is immersed in long days and very busy work.

However, with proper planning, training can be achieved during slacker periods. Training will always be recognised by employees as beneficial and will result in bigger wins all round. Teagasc can help with training requirements.

A good supervisor needs to learn to be both firm and fair: Communicating tasks clearly and concisely is vital in a very busy yard. Having a structured planned time each day that allows a quiet interaction between a supervisor and the employee is important.

Farm offices can be the venue where team or one-to-one meetings take place. Verbal instruction should back up written communications. There should be a whiteboard in every office with clear instructions on daily and weekly tasks.

Even the best working environments have issues that crop up from time to time. The important thing to remember is where you as an employer stand from a legal perspective. The Workplace Relations Commission offers a service to all employers on workplace-related issues. Visit www.employersdirect.ie/workplace-

This advice is free and is well worth a look if you have a question on a staff-related issue. Forewarned is forearmed, so when it comes to dealing with delicate staffing issues, a quick call to the freephone number can go a long way to sorting out problems before they come to the boil.

Another excellent resource is the Teagasc *Labour Manual* available on the Teagasc website.