

Employee Benefits: What Helps Them Also Helps You

Low-cost perks and a farmer's attitude may be just as important as money and benefits.



Ronnie Hargett (left) and DeForrest Kelly Keeling share a working relationship based on friendship.

The huge enterprise of A. Duda and Sons has the luxury of offering its 2,500 seasonal and 1,000 full-time employees an array of benefits: health and life insurance, a pension plan, vacation time, even housing and child care in some cases.

The sprawling citrus and vegetable enterprise, which has operations in Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas, has been recognized for its rich offerings to employees.

"You can either look at things like benefits and housing as a cost, or you can look at them as an investment," contends Stuart Longworth, vice president of human resources at A. Duda.

Well, sure, you may be saying, but that's A. Duda. What about a much smaller operation with a handful of employees or even only one? Then, all you can ante up is long hours, demanding work, and low pay, right?

Think again. Of all the rewards A. Duda offers, the one most appreciated doesn't cost a dime.

"The most important thing is the way you treat your people and the way you communicate with them—living the Golden Rule," Longworth says.

In a survey, 600 farm workers were asked why they were leaving their jobs. Money was not among the top four reasons.

"The four things that were most important to them were achievement, growth, recognition, and responsibility," says Gary Maas of Agri-Careers,

Inc., the Massena, Iowa, recruiting firm that conducted the survey.

Some Creative Thinking

Long hours and hard work are often required, but employees also have lives off the farm.

David Nichols, a Bridgewater, Iowa, cattleman, has an unusual arrange-

ment with his five employees.

"Anytime their children have a ballet or piano recital, a Little League baseball game, or a 4-H project, they can attend those family activities, and it does not count against their vacation time," says Nichols. "I measure everything by results."

He and his wife, Phyllis; sister-in-law



Dave Nichols hosts a breakfast for his employees each week, followed by a meeting to set the week's priorities.



Dan Smalley (striped shirt) of Arab, Ala., encourages employees James Long (left), May Coppett, and Carl Hancock to work together to make the poultry farm efficient. The three workers decide among themselves their work schedule.

Lillian; and mother, Gladys, are partners in the operation, which has 2,000 commercial and purebred cattle.

Bill Antidel, Nichols' foreman, says, "I guess it would be the closest thing to being on your own farm as you can get."

Dan Smalley of Arab, Ala., also believes in entrusting responsibility to his three longtime employees. The Gold Kist contract grower depends heavily on his help; his 16 broiler houses produce 6 flocks annually, with 380,000 birds per flock.

"During the hot weather, somebody's here from daylight until dark," the poultry producer says. When the chickens are moved from the farm, grueling 24-hour blocks of time have to be divided up. The employees work out their own schedules.

Responsibility is also a key ingredient in Ronnie Hargett's relationship with DeForrest Kelly Keeling.

"He will stay with me from daylight till dark," says Hargett of Rich Pond, Ky. "Most young farm workers will whine or complain if it's past 6 o'clock on a Saturday night and we're still out in the hay field."

"I love to work," says the 23-year-old Keeling. "I'm in charge of part-time people when we're baling hay or cutting tobacco and Ronnie [leaves]."

The two have talked frequently of Keeling's plans to own a farm, hopefully in partnership with Hargett. But until then, they complement each other well: the industrious young powerhouse and his experienced mentor.

Boosting Low Pay

"Probably the biggest problem with farm help is making enough in farming to be able to pay them more," says Eddy Brown of Garfield, Ga. But if salaries must be low, bonuses, incentives, special benefits, and in-kind gifts can add heft.

"If you just compare wages, it is hard to do that with somebody working in a coal mine or a plant," says Tupper Dorsey of Moore and Dorsey. The 2,000-acre Berryville, Va., operation has as few as 50 to as many as 280 workers who help with the farm's fruits and other crops.

"But if you start adding in housing and some other things, it is not so bad," Dorsey adds.

10 Steps to a Good Working Relationship

1 Give employees a chance to achieve by allowing them to complete a job from beginning to end.

2 Provide employees with an opportunity for growth. Pay for a worker's computer course at a local college, for example.

3 Grant responsibility. Increase this responsibility periodically; no one enjoys a dead-end job.

4 Show appreciation. When an outsider visits, for example, introduce your workers and explain how they contribute to the farm's success.

5 Put yourself in the employee's place. Off-farm and family life are important. Work with your employees to help them balance their commitments.

6 Praise your helpers publicly; offer constructive criticism in private.

7 If you offer incentives, make certain they are presented on a trial basis so you can fine-tune them without having to renege and disappoint employees.

8 Ask employees to set long-term and short-term goals. Tell them about your own ambitions for the operation; set priorities and deadlines.

9 Deal with employees as individuals. Different styles of communication and motivation work with different people.

10 Treat workers as you would want to be treated.

For Smalley employee Carl Hancock, bonuses are not expected; they are earned. "We do our best so we can get one," he says.

Each time Smalley sells a flock, the cost of growing those birds is compared with other Gold Kist flocks sold in the area that week.

"They give you a plus or a minus for each flock," he explains. "For each plus, my workers get \$4.

"The maximum points possible per

flock is 75, which means a maximum bonus of \$300. At 18 flocks per year, that translates to a possible annual incentive bonus of \$5,400."

Although each employee is responsible for his or her own birds, all three receive a bonus no matter whose chickens are most profitable.

On some farms, uniforms and laundering are employment pluses. Other farmers provide trucks or pay usage fees to employees who use their own vehicles. Housing is one of the most significant perks a farmer can offer.

James Long points to his central air and heat thermostat as if it were a magic device.

"Before, I had a little bitty house with three rooms, no water, no air conditioning, and no bathroom," he says. Smalley provides Long and his wife with a three-bedroom house.

"Dan said if we work here and retire, it's our house for as long as we live," Long adds.

Sticky Wickets: Health Care and Retirement

Some benefits, like health care, still daunt most farmers, many of whom can't afford their own insurance.

Nichols' employees share a group plan with Nichols and his partners.

"It doesn't matter to me as an employer whether I write a check to the insurance company or whether I write it out to the employee," he says.

"Let's say I'm going to spend \$2,000 a month on an employee. It's his decision whether he gets \$1,500 in cash and \$500 in benefits or whether he gets \$1,900 in cash and \$100 in insurance," he explains.

Retirement planning is usually another looming gap for farm employees. But even small farms can offer in-kind gifts that can provide investment capital for the future.

This year, Hargett will give 1 of his 28 acres of tobacco to young Keeling. Nichols allows a worker to purchase

one of the farm's cows, usually a purebred, for each year that the employee works with him. The cattle are then raised with Nichols' own stock at no cost to the worker.

"One of our employees sold a cow last year that brought \$30,000," Nichols says.

From the Heart

The most important gift may be the simplest: Treat an employee as you want to be treated yourself.

"If you think a hired man is just somebody that's getting paid \$6 an hour, who's supposed to work his guts out for you, and you can fire or hire him at will because he's just like a cow, that's the kind of commitment you're going to get," Nichols says.

"My employees mean more to me than anybody except my family," he says. "They're responsible for the success or failure of Nichols Farm."

BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

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