

Making the Leap to Owner— Operator: Are You Labor Ready? ETHAN GRUNDBERG, ENYCHP

Deciding to start a farm can present a multitude of challenges. Do you have access to suitable farmland? Have you identified your markets? What equipment are you going to need to put your plan into practice? Will you need to borrow money to start your business? While the question “who is going to do all of the work on the farm?” is also usually on that short list of things that keep aspiring farmers up at night, it is much less common for new growers to ask themselves “do I have the tools and experience necessary to be an effective manager of farm employees?”

Thanks in part to funding from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (grant number 2017-70017-26837), from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Cornell University and Grow NYC are partnering to work with fruit and vegetable growers across New York to help support advanced beginning farmers hone their personnel management skills and become “labor-ready farmers.” Additionally, we will be working on developing resources to support Latino farm employees develop the skills that they need to advance to management level positions on produce farms in the state. We already have some programming in the works focusing on topics from labor regulatory compliance to how to write a great job description, but we are going to want your help identifying labor management issues that you want to improve. To that end, keep an eye out for the survey announcement coming in early 2018 to help shape our curriculum!

Farmers of all ages and experience levels can struggle with attracting and retaining employees, but newer farms operating on a shoestring budget and struggling to develop production and marketing systems with small crews often feel the impact especially acutely. Max Morningstar, owner and operator of MX Morningstar Farm in Copake, NY, described his first few years in this chaotic

environment by saying, “the farm was so insane at that point that we didn’t so much care what method people were using, so long as it was getting done.” The lack of clear expectations and structures for employees to follow can worsen the state of frenzy of a growing season, but can also lead to more work for managers who can fall into the trap of micromanaging under those circumstances. Again, Morningstar felt like he struggled “knowing how to delegate while leading without micromanaging” during the first few years supervising farm employees and has since invested more time in training new employees and setting clear expectations at the outset.

Training and expectation setting are commonly identified by farmers as areas that “need improvement” on the farm, but that are also deemed invaluable for the business to run smoothly. Leon Vehaba, Farm Director at the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, has used some of his experiences gleaned from an earlier career in private industry to emphasize training on the farm. Vehaba notes that, “I find that whenever we really invest the time to train people that first week, it really pays off.” Jeff Bialas of J&A Farm in Goshen, NY agrees and emphasizes the need to have clear systems in place before hiring to be able to effectively train new employees. Successful training depends on “creating an efficient system and teaching people to work within that system.” Jeff also adds that another value of having clear production and marketing systems in place is that it can depersonalize critical feedback. The conversation becomes less about “this is how I want it done” to “this is how it’s done here.” This initial training and expectation setting is so important to Jeff that he makes sure that he’s the one in the field working with new employees for the bulk of the first two weeks on the job. This helps to ensure that the new crew clearly understands the processes that he has in place, allows sufficient time to observe how those employees are acclimating, and provides an opportunity for timely constructive feedback.

It is easy to write off labor sourcing and retention challenges as being a natural outcome of the inherent misery of farm work.

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Who wants to work long hours in inclement weather doing repetitive and uncomfortable tasks for what is often a less-than-living wage, right? How can I expect to keep my crew year after year when I can't offer them year-round work? Though there is certainly some truth in those statements, it is also the case that some farms have found ways to improve labor management and create incentives for workers to stick around for many years that don't have to cost the business a lot of time or money. For example, research out of Central California found that respectful treatment of employees by managers and owners was one of the biggest factors influencing labor retention and happiness at work (see <http://www.cirsinc.org/publications/farm-labor?download=47:positive-practices-in-farm-labor-management-keeping-your-employees-happy-and-your-production-profitable> for more information). Or, as Jeff Bialas put it, "a lot of it [labor retention] comes down to having a safe and comfortable place to work."

There are plenty of other examples of how to improve personnel management on the farm and we're excited to share them with you over the next couple of years. In addition to continuing with this labor management article series, we'll be announcing a series of webinars, roundtables for Latino farm employees, and more over the winter. For now, please reach out to Kat McCarthy at the Cornell Small Farms Program (kmm485@cornell.edu), Gabriela Pereyra at Grow NYC (gpereyra@grownyc.org), or Ethan Grundberg at Cornell Cooperative Extension (eg572@cornell.edu) for more information. This work is supported by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant no. 2017-70017-26837, from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Supervising Seasonal and Temporary Workers: Special Considerations

ELIZABETH HIGGINS, ENYCHP

Most fruit and vegetable farms need to hire people on a temporary seasonal basis. The short length of time which seasonal employees will be on your farm does require some special considerations. Although these workers are only on your farm for a little while, they contribute to the success of your farm business. Below are some tips for getting the best contribution out of your seasonal farm staff.

Good Employee-Employer Relations

Although it is challenging to make time for training and orientation during the height of the season, you will increase your worker's commitment to your farm if you can get to know your seasonal employees as quickly as you can and communicate to them their value to the business and the importance of their job. The group is made up of

unique individuals who do not want to be viewed as a faceless mass. At a minimum, try to learn each person's name immediately. Find out each person's interests and develop a relationship with him or her as quickly as possible. You want to establish a trusting relationship between the two of you and to develop a commitment to *your* farm on the part of the worker. When training is short changed, this will help to increase their confidence in coming to you with issues or concerns before they become serious problems.

Language Barriers

If you cannot speak the language of your employees, the best advice is to start learning it immediately. To get the best effort out of your employees they must be able to understand you and be able to communicate problems to you. The inability to communicate with everyone makes establishing good employee-employer relationships with your employees more challenging.

The use of interpreters on farms is a common solution, but it must be done with caution. Often interpreters make inaccurate translations, do not stress the same points that you

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would, or change what you say to elevate their own position. This responsibility gives them a powerful position in your business. They can withhold, or share information based on their own needs. Rarely do interpreters just translate; often they also supervise groups of workers. With their control of the flow of information they have tremendous power over the people beneath them. Employee grievances may not come to your attention until they have reached unsolvable proportions.

Work Crews

Large groups or labor crews who work closely together can present another challenge. They may live and travel together developing very close bonds. They often depend on each other for food, loans, and other assistance. A supervisor's disagreement with one worker may quickly become a confrontation with the entire crew as it did on one New York farm. One member of a labor crew was told the cost of his damaged picking-sack would be deducted from his pay. The rest of the crew agreed with the worker's story that the sack had a broken strap when it was given to him. The disagreement escalated, and the employee was ordered to return to the labor camp. To show their support of their fellow employee, the rest of the crew sat right down in the orchard and refused to work until the man could return to work.

On the other hand, a crew also knows when one employee is disrupting work or is taking advantage of you. You will gain respect of the group by dealing with this employee's behavior fairly. Other employees will support you when they see fair treatment for everyone. If they perceive favoritism or arbitrary treatment, the whole group will react. Establishing a relationship with each individual will be the determining factor. If they know and trust you, they will come to you with problems or complaints before things get out of hand.

Housing

Although good housing conditions can be used to attract workers, when you are providing housing to an employee, you need to be particularly careful about whom you hire. The process of evicting a former employee from housing which you provide can be a lengthy process. The effect of a disruptive

employee on your other employees in nearby housing must be considered. Migrant farm workers reported leaving a well-liked employer because other workers at the labor camp were causing problems for them or their families.

Cultural Differences and Values Conflicts

People from various cultural and ethnic groups have different ways of viewing the world and have their own, unique value system. When people from different cultures work together, you need to take the time to talk about differences. Consider these differences as you establish work rules and methods for achieving your goals. A farm worker repeatedly arrived late for work in the morning. The manager told him that the next incident meant termination of his employment. This farm worker gave rides each morning to two neighbors whose jobs started later than his. The choice of leaving his friends behind or being late for work was not even a choice to him. Of course, he would wait for his friends. Respecting the values of your employees and trying to be flexible in your operation will allow you to draw on the strengths of each person involved. Explaining your production practices and the logic behind your rules will go a long way toward preventing problems.

Resources to help:

The Eastern New York Team will be offering a session with tips and resources (in Spanish) for working with Latino farmworkers at the Winter Fruit School in Albany on Tuesday, February 20.

We are also offering the Human Resource training program "Good To Great in Ag Labor Management" on January 4 and 11 from 9-4 in Ballston Spa and on four consecutive Thursdays in March from 5:00-8:00 pm (March 1-22). Registration is available on the ENYCH website <https://enych.cce.cornell.edu/events.php>

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