

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

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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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