

CONTRACT FARMER IS GUIDED BY SAFE HANDS

Restructuring a business can be difficult, but handled carefully it can build staff motivation and lead to an improved financial return, as Safety Revolution's **Oliver Dale** explains

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

If you spend £40,000 per annum on a key member of staff you hope to retain them – if you succeed in doing that over 10 years you might well spend, on aggregate, £500,000 on them – would you expect to invest that sort of money on equipment without budgeting a maintenance spend to keep it operating safely and at peak performance?

Managing staff or components of that process such as recruitment, drafting contracts of employment or undertaking a disciplinary or appraisal process are often looked at in isolation.

In fact, they should all be seen as part of the process of ensuring that your team is in the right shape and progressing at the right pace to meet your business's goals. If you are growing in terms of land or new enterprises, then the team needs to grow and develop at the same pace to ensure that it is able to deliver quality and consistency as you concentrate on making a financial return.

Getting the most out of the team, ensuring that documentation, such as contracts of employment, are in order and helping staff and employers to communicate effectively are part of a process of investing in your people – your human capital.

Like a Formula One car, maintaining peak performance of your team involves regular tweaking. It involves a maintenance spend – in just the same way as you do for the valuable equipment that they operate.

BUSINESS STRUCTURE

When Robert Barnes, who farms 2,000 hectares at Marston Moretaine, in Bedfordshire, decided to restructure his contract farming arrangements, he realised that this meant changing his business's structure.

His first consideration was how he could reshape his team and lay the groundwork for the future. At the same time he wanted to step back from the business to have more time with his family while giving the guys on the ground the opportunity to grow and develop in their roles.

Mr Barnes already used Safety Revolution to deal with his employment contracts and employment procedures and asked us to organise and lead the team development process. The first stage was



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to establish what the business goals were and how we needed to manage the team to meet those goals. It was important to consider the practical aspects: how did we maintain a flexible team; how did we create opportunities for staff to develop professionally and at the same time ensure that the business also improved its financial performance.

It was a sizeable task and one that fortunately Mr Barnes realised would not be performed overnight. In addition to acting as a facilitator we were able to act as a sounding board to help ensure each stage was completed with the minimum of stress.

This included managing a redundancy process, refreshing employment contracts and setting performance-based goals for the core team.

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Chaired by Safety Revolution for employee and employer benefit, the appraisal meetings presented an opportunity for staff to speak freely while using me as someone the guys could talk to for guidance and at times vent their frustration. It allowed us to summarise key objectives, build those with the team and get everyone on board.

The role of mediator and facilitator doesn't end once the process is completed. I spoke to Mr Barnes recently to evaluate progress and was pleased with how the team is adapting.

As he said: “We are, as a team, very much a work in progress, but we are

finding that the guys are excited by the progress we are making and it [the engagement process] has definitely given us a massive payback in terms of motivation and commitment from the team.”

The Barnes's situation is typical of British agriculture. As the owner he is fully engaged in running the business and wrestling with the commercial vagaries of the market.

Working with his men on a daily basis makes it difficult to be able to step back and assess performance in an objective manner without having emotion distorting his view. It is this impartial and constructive appraisal that we supply. We are able to give the owner or manager feedback on what is going on elsewhere in the industry, what are the trends in salaries and benefits and what the business needs to do in terms of remaining competitive as an employer that wants to attract and retain the best staff.

INDEPENDENT PERSPECTIVE

Having got the core of his team in place, we are now assisting Mr Barnes in the recruitment of a new sprayer operator.

Recruiting the right person to compliment the team is as much about finding the right character and cultural fit as it is about identifying the right skills, and this is where our independent perspective really helps.

We then assist in short-listing candidates for interview as well as helping the client to compare candidates, identify those likely to best fit the system and, most importantly, follow the new recruit as they settle into the role to help both parties ensure success.

It is worth noting that if you are recruiting or using temporary staff sourced from a labour provider or gangmaster, it is vital that you check that they are licensed by the Gangmaster Licensing Authority (GLA). There is a duty placed upon the employer or user of staff to ensure that they are using a licensed labour provider.

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