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Farm employee management: new employee orientation

by Melissa O'Rourke, extension farm and agribusiness management specialist, 712-737-4230, morourke@iastate.edu

You only get one chance to make a good first impression. Employee orientation is the employer's opportunity to make a good first impression on the new employee that sets the tone for the employment relationship. Unfortunately, some farm employers neglect this vital step.

All employees need orientation and training as they begin new employment. While training is an ongoing process that continues throughout employment, the orientation phase begins with the first day on the job and is generally completed within the first week or so of employment. Another article in my Farm Employee Management series provides tips and guidelines for getting the new farm employee off to a good start on the first day of employment. (See "Getting the New Employee Off to a Good Start on Day One.") That first day on the job will fly by quickly. The smart farm employer will have a plan in place for employee orientation and training. This article outlines the purposes and key components of an employee orientation program.

The process of socialization helps to reduce a new employee's natural anxiety that comes with starting any new job. A new employee who becomes comfortable in the workplace is more likely to develop and maintain a positive attitude toward the job and the employer. That positive attitude translates into earlier and higher productivity. When the new worker is assisted in becoming quickly familiar with the work environment, the stress level decreases and the individual is better able to learn new job duties, skills and expectations. This socialization aspect of employee orientation prepares a new worker for job training. If a new employee is relieved of

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Handbook updates
 For those of you subscribing to the handbook, the following new updates are included.

- Deductible Livestock Costs for Adjusting Income Tax Returns** – B1-15 (1 page)
- Financial Troubleshooting** – C3-53 (6 pages)
- Financial Performance Measures for Iowa Farms** – C3-55 (8 pages)
- Farm Financial Statements** – C3-56 (8 pages)
- Evaluating Farm Accounting Software**– C6-32 (2 pages)

Please add these files to your handbook and remove the out-of-date material. *continued on page 6*

Purposes of farm employee orientation
Employee orientation helps employees become socialized to your farm business. This

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general stress and worry, that individual is able to concentrate and absorb substantive information about new job assignments and tasks.

Planning and content of orientation program

If your farm has not previously conducted an employee orientation program, planning may seem like an overwhelming task. One way to think about orientation is to sit down with current employees and ask for input. Ask current employees what they wish they had been told when they first started working at your farm. Find out what they view as important information for newcomers. Every farm business is different, but some possible content areas to consider including the following:

Background and overview of your farm: Provide new employees with your farm's story – the history and development of the farm business. This should include information about key people in the farm's history as well as present-day leadership. Share your farm's mission statement, goals and objectives. While a farm tour may have been part of the pre-employment process, this should be repeated, perhaps over a series of days as the new employee is introduced to the layout of facilities, fields and operations. Throughout the process, emphasize the role and importance of employees in the farm's success.

Employee policies: Even the smallest farm should consider development of an employee handbook or policy document. (See "Do We Need an Employee Handbook?" in the Farm Employee Management series.) As part of the employee orientation process, all key policies, compensation and benefits information should be reviewed. Do not just present the new employee stacks of documents and instructions to read. Orientation is the employer's opportunity to review the policies, explain rationale and provide opportunities for questions or clarification.

Introductions: While the new employee may have been introduced to some individuals during the pre-employment process, introductions should

be repeated. Name badges (or embroidered shirts/apparel) can be very helpful in the farm workplace. Provide the new employee with an organizational chart or list of names. Include names of people who visit the farm on a regular basis such as drivers, veterinarians, suppliers, service personnel, neighbors or relatives.

Job duty information: While a position description was most likely discussed during the employment process, this is a key part of the new employee orientation phase. Provide the written position description and use it as a guide to discuss specific tasks including training that will be provided to the new employee. Emphasize basic safety and indicate the importance of ongoing safety training and awareness. Help a new employee to understand the relationship and importance of the position to other jobs and functions on the farm.

Who should conduct new employee orientation?

To assure a consistent message to new employees, it is useful to have the same person conduct orientation. However, identifying other supervisors or more experienced co-workers to participate in the process will also assist in the socialization aspect of orientation. All members of the orientation team should be those who will share a positive attitude with the new employee. Especially during the early days of employment, the new worker needs to hear constructive, upbeat messages geared toward making those good, early impressions.

A well-planned orientation program takes an investment of time and effort on the part of the farm employer. Providing a positive orientation experience during the early days of employment sets the stage for a satisfying, long-term employment relationship on your farm.

As always, feel free to contact me with any of your farm employee management questions.