



Prioritizing Time Spent on Human Resource Management

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Human Resource Priorities of the Farm Business

Time and energy available for human resource management is often in competition with time and energy available for financial management, strategic planning, or production-oriented decision making. Farm owners and managers are faced with a finite amount of time – as are all of us! Therefore, managers must make tradeoffs in determining how they will spend their management time and energy on the farm.

Human resource management is not a traditionally strong area of focus for agricultural business managers. In the past, most of the labor required for the farm business was provided by family members making the need for management of non-family labor significantly less than it is today. Nowadays, managers are challenged with on-farm teams including farm family members, in-laws, employees from varying and diverse cultures, and potentially also outside experts consulting on feeding programs or financial management. In short, on-farm management has become increasingly complex and many agricultural managers are faced with learning how to effectively manage their human resources via (1) managing their own labor and management capacity, as well as, (2) managing their labor force.

Urgency versus Importance

In their book, *First Things First*, Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill explore time management to create balance and teach an organizational process that helps you to put 'first things first'. The key is that *First Things First* is focused on helping people to put attention on things that are important, not just those things that are urgent through identifying whether things are:

- Important & Urgent (e.g., deadlines and crises)
- Important & Not Urgent (e.g., planning, relationship building)
- Urgent & Not Important (e.g., interruptions)
- Not Urgent & Not Important (e.g., time wasting activities)

While the book seeks to help individuals manage their time and view time management/prioritizing their time in a completely different way, the concept can easily be applied to managers seeking to manage their time in how they will best serve the needs of their farm business. Borrowing from the basis for the above concept of identifying and prioritizing tasks based on urgency and importance can be a powerful way for farm managers to identify where to place effort and time in reference to managing their human resources.

Urgent often means 'front and center'

Much of a producer's day is filled with urgent needs. Pigs need to be fed and the barn needs to be cleaned before the next load of pigs arrives. From moment to moment throughout the day, agricultural producers are always set to work on the next most pressing task on their to-do list. This is for good reason: agriculture is a time sensitive industry! If you think about how you spent your time today – how much of the day was devoted to addressing urgent needs? More critically, how much time was devoted to addressing urgent & not important needs? Managers must figure out how to address important & not urgent needs before they become critical because they have moved into a damage control situation that must be remedied.

Important issues need attention too; consider it a good investment before problems develop!

While producers are constantly bouncing from those important & urgent to those urgent & not important issues, they rarely have time for the important & not urgent activities. Estate and succession planning, farm financial and tax records (outside of tax deadline day), and human resources are all examples of these seldom urgent, but certainly important issues.

Farmers do not have the time and resources to waste on not urgent & not important issues...most producers naturally avoid this area if they are to be successful agriculturalists. Nonetheless, producers must determine how to develop strategies to devote quality management time and capacity to issues that are important – even if they are never 'front and center' urgent activities.

Important Issues Turned Urgent Needs

Consider the situation ... the farm has been stretched a little thin on staff for feeding and processing piglets for a few weeks now. Farm managers are aware, but everyone is pitching in and getting the job done, so no real time has been spent putting critical thought into whether the farm should be hiring an additional person or not. Perhaps at the next farm meeting everyone will discuss whether another crew member is needed and, if so, what skill set that person should possess. Monday morning one of the two senior employees delivers the news – he's leaving for a different position, closer to home. Managers have two weeks to fill his spot. The vacant position has just gone from being important & not urgent to an important & urgent need. Managers must scramble to fill the position. There is little time (no time really) for farm management meetings and strategic staffing planning; the farm hires as soon as possible and plans to train the new employee. Perhaps if staffing and strategic thinking surrounding employees and needed skills were completed, better hiring decisions could have been made.

It isn't hard to imagine other situations in which important issues are not addressed, making urgent tasks that develop harder to handle. Violations of labor laws are urgent needs to be handled by management. Could increasing attention on labor laws and keeping the management team up to date be an important issue that if it were prioritized more highly could have aided in preventing important & urgent (and potentially critical) situations from developing, for example?

Time Management Tips!

You must find what works for you! No single system of keeping track of important issues and deadlines will work for everyone. Each manager must determine what system works best for them. For some it might mean carrying a notebook to jot down tasks as they are realized. For others an electronic system may work best.

1. Develop to-do lists with objectives and goals in mind. Determine what time-frame works best for you and determine what tasks must be accomplished during that time. Keep track of those tasks and progress towards completion.
2. Prioritize your to-do list. We've all experienced the to-do list that is so long that you do not know where to start. Prioritize your tasks so you will know where to start.
3. Start! Many good laid plans are never implemented. This is not because we aren't capable of the task. Oftentimes, tasks that seem overwhelming are never accomplished – not because they are too large – but because they are never started! Determine bottlenecks to success and address them so that those tasks which you have prioritized as being

important to helping the business achieve its goals and mission can be tackled.

4. Keep track of progress. Keep track of tasks completed so you'll know what tasks are outstanding and be able to reprioritize if necessary. It is good practice to keep track of all the tasks worked on, especially the unexpected ones. This will help you understand how much of your time was spent putting out those sudden and urgent fires.

5. Be honest with yourself about shortfalls. Set aside time to honestly reflect on tasks that were not completed. Determine why tasks were not completed and take steps towards remedying the situations that are preventing success. Oftentimes uncomfortable or unfamiliar tasks are avoided; be honest with yourself if you are spending time on seemingly urgent tasks to avoid addressing important, but potentially difficult or uncomfortable issues.

Consider developing a schematic like the following example that works for you operation to prioritize tasks, keep track of progress, and determine potential bottlenecks.

Week of _____ Sample: June 6th - 12th		Individual _____		Notes:
Goals:		Responsible		
1)	_____	_____	_____	
2)	_____	_____	_____	
3)	_____	_____	_____	
Task	Priority Ranking		End of Week Progress:	Shortfalls/ Bottlenecks
	Urgency: High, Med, Low	Importance: High, Med, Low	Complete, Started, Not Yet Started	
Sample: Complete payroll for Friday	High	High	Complete	None
Sample: Determine staffing needs for harvest season	Low	High	Not yet started	Need to hear back from Bob on availability first; calling Monday

What if you truly don't have time? Consider Outside Help

Don't be afraid to enlist outside help! Consider asking a third-party to mediate particularly sensitive discussions rather than simply sweeping human resource problems under the rug. Consider hiring an expert to help with the major challenge areas of the farm business, whether this includes an attorney to help answer questions regarding hiring or termination practices, an attorney to answer questions regarding legality surrounding foreign labor, or a mediator to help sort through potentially troubling issues between owners, manager, and/or employees. Also, consider asking for outside help when it simply isn't productive for you to devote the necessary time to given tasks. Your time might be best spent elsewhere. If you were to get behind in spraying corn, you'd consider hiring the local co-op, right? The same can be true for those important & not urgent areas of your operation.

Summary

Farm managers, like everyone, face challenges regarding time allocation. Time must be allocated between various production activities, financial management, personnel and human resource management, strategic planning for the farm business, and numerous other activities, in a dynamic system in which internal and external factors are contributing to challenges for management. Prioritizing tasks as important & urgent, urgent & not important, important & not urgent, and not urgent & not important can help managers get a handle on tasks associated with human resource management and determine how to prioritize those tasks. Time management is key to successfully managing human resources, as well as the entire farm business. Honest assessment of challenges to accomplishing important tasks can help managers be productive and successful. Managers should consider consulting experts outside the farm business, if necessary, rather than sweeping important issues aside until they become urgent and critical problems.