

Managing Labor on the Farm

I don't consider myself an avid sports fan, but I do pay close enough attention to know what is going on. I am especially impressed at times like this when experienced teams are competing in tournaments and many normally rational people are overcome with March Madness. My general observation leads me to believe that talent laden teams are not always the winning teams. Often, well coached teams with limited natural talent, win games because they know their respective roles, trust each other and work well together.

Coaching is hard work because individuals are so different. Some players need to be motivated and others need to be calmed down. Some are cooperative while others resist direction. Some players are overly confident and some need continual assurance and encouragement. Some like being a one-man show, while others prefer the role of assisting. When individual players and coaches have one heartbeat together, as a team, they can do impressive things.

A good coach always makes the best of each person's abilities. Managing labor on a farm is similar to coaching a basketball team and labor management is becoming a major issue on our larger farms. Whether we know it or not, every manager's decisions and behavior reflect personal philosophy built from past experiences and observations. Raymond Miles, in his book "Managers' Theories of Management" believes that all managers have a "theory" of management that affects how they operate, even if they are not conscious of it. General examples may include philosophies such as: "If you want the task done right, do it yourself." "The supervisor who respects his/her crew will be respected by them." "Before entrusting business assets to family, decide which you value most."

In "The Human Side of Enterprise", Douglas McGregor writes about labor management, human nature and our inclination to work. He defines "Theory X" something like this: The average human being has a dislike of work and will avoid it if he or she can. Because humans dislike work, most people must be coerced, controlled, directed and threatened to get them to put forth adequate effort. The average human being prefers to be directed, wishes to avoid responsibility, has relatively little ambition and wants security above all else.

McGregor's "Theory Y" assumptions are expressed as follows: The expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as rest or play. Humans will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which they are committed. Commitment to objectives is a function of the rewards associated with their achievement. Under proper conditions, the average human being learns not only to accept but seek responsibility. The capacity to exercise a high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in the solution of problems is widely distributed in the population.

Dr. David Kohl, Professor Emeritus, Virginia Tech Agricultural and Economic Department, recently told dairy producers to manage employees according to their generation of birth. He explained that our attitudes and philosophies are based upon what we experienced between the ages of 5 and 15. Successful labor managers will adjust practices to better deal with employees as they really are. Kohl broke his employee groups into four categories: Veterans (born before

1946), Boomers (born between 1946-1964), Xers (born between 1964-1982), Nexters (born after 1982).

According to Kohl, members of the Veterans generation are practical, dedicated, respectful and willing to sacrifice. Because they saw many businesses fail during the Great Depression and World War II, they tend to place a high priority on employment.

The Boomers experienced the Korean and Vietnam War during their younger years. As such, they view authority with skepticism. However, they tend to be optimistic, driven and seek consensus.

The Xers are often skeptical and difficult to impress. They are reluctant to commit and resist placing work over other interests. Because they grew up in more prosperous times, they work to live and expect flexibility in their work schedules.

The Nexters are hopeful, determined, polite and inclusive. They are careful not to offend other workers, are technically savvy and want the environment in which they work to be fun and entertaining.

Kohl suggests that if farm managers/coaches want to keep the people who keep them in business, they must know their employees well enough to utilize their respective strengths for the benefit of the team. Leadership style and supervisory skills will largely determine how motivated and productive farm employees are.