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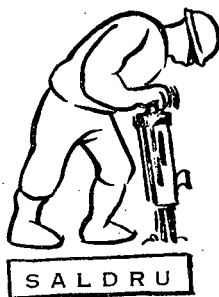
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Some Thoughts on Farm Management, Labour and Productivity

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SOME THOUGHTS ON FARM MANAGEMENT, LABOUR AND PRODUCTIVITY

Rosemary Elliott

There are two key areas of the farming operation which are closely linked. The productivity of labour and the productivity of the farm. It is not easy to generalise about the productivity of labour without a scientific study, but on many farms it must be between two-thirds and perhaps even a half of its potential capacity.

LOW PRODUCTIVITY

There are a number of inter-related reasons why the productivity of labour is low. The following are some key ones.

1. Low wages.
2. Poor work planning by farmer.
3. Low expectation: initiative is not adequately rewarded, promotion is virtually unheard of - although some farmers do 'reward' long service by a small annual increase in wages.
4. Poor living conditions: housing is often inadequate, many families living in 2 rooms: and while cows have running water and chickens have electric light, farm labour frequently has neither.

General comment - From the farmer's point of view, labourers are often unreliable. They cannot 'get on with the job' without constant supervision. Should a farmer decide to improve the conditions of living and work, with higher wages and better housing, this often proves counterproductive. This is particularly true with a new farmer who often gets less reliable service than his less enlightened neighbours.

There are patterns of thought and relationships which are deeply ingrained and any move to alter them meets with deep suspicion. Resentment is often generated instead of goodwill.

Often, there is a basic misunderstanding on what the farmer and the labourer expect of one another. To a farmer 'responsibility' means being sober and reliable on the job and no absenteeism. To a labourer 'responsibility' often appears to mean more work for the same money. A farmer seldom realises that IT DOES NOT PAY A LABOURER TO WORK HARDER.

There are other influences at work which makes it difficult to increase the speed and rhythms of work. Long hours do not necessarily mean more work. The body adjusts to enable it to continue working for the prescribed period and by working from sun-up to sundown, many farmers

actually get less work from their men than if they worked an 8 to 9 hour day.

The working group exerts a very strong influence on the rate of work. This is not consciously decided upon, but it is determined at a subconscious level and enables the working group to accommodate its slowest members.

SOLUTIONS

1. Piecowork: This is a good method for getting certain jobs done, but on some farms it does not always work satisfactorily because the rates paid for the job are very low. The result can be seen in increasing mechanisation. The farmer becomes willing to spend several thousand rand on a machine to do the work of his labour force. He does not often sack the men made redundant by the machine but he won't replace men who leave and the number of people employed on the land drops.

There is one very significant aspect of this process: real wealth is being drained away from rural communities and instead of the wealth of the land developing the people who live on the land, it is going to big manufacturing companies in ever increasing amounts.

2. Time for the job: Another incentive which some farmers find successful is to set the work to be done and let the men go home when it is finished. This seems to me to miss the whole point of the problem, even if it solves the immediate one of getting a specific job done within a 'reasonable' time. The problem is to increase the productivity of the land which is dependant to a large degree on the productivity of the labour.

MOTIVATION

Present difficulties: There is no easy solution to improved motivation because of the complicated human relationships involved. Even with a go-ahead farmer, there are labourers with a 'traditional' ingrained response, who resist and are suspicious of changes and often work against their success. There are also farmers who are not ready to make the changes which would improve the situation. Some farmers

are content with the 'traditional way of life', which enables him and his family to live in varying degrees of comfort with a labour force which is efficient and subservient, but often loyal and within certain limits, content. The younger men are not attracted to this sort of set up and these farmers find it increasingly difficult to get 'boys' to replace their older employees. This results in the brighter youngsters with more initiative leaving the farming industry.

Other farmers would like to improve the life-style and relationship with their employees but find themselves severely restricted by farm debts, bonds and lack of working capital. If this has been a prolonged situation, he is not only less and less able to 'think new' about his problems, but he grows despondent as inadequate or partial solutions are tried and fail (e.g. a farmer plants a crop and cannot afford to fertilise it properly and so gets minimal return on maximum effort).

Assuming that both farmer and labour want to move into a more productive relationship, what are some of the major problems which inhibit this?

Practical difficulties

1. Distrust based on past experience.
2. Inadequate communication between farmer and labourers making for misunderstanding.
3. Lack of time for labourers to discuss new suggestions and come up with counterproposals. Where farmers do give time for their staff to 'think' about a matter, it is frequently not 'his' time and labourers who are living apart from one another do not come together and thrash it out. The result is frequently a half-baked response.
4. Priorities of management and labour are not the same and it is mostly the farmer who wants to talk about HIS priorities. If labour try to raise their own, they are considered 'cheeky' or 'trouble-makers'.

POSSIBLE SOLUTION

General: There is no way of Instant Success in changing patterns of human relationships. They mature when based on trust and mutual respect. As people grow in confidence with one another, greater progress can be made. Perception is also sharpened. Both the farmer and the labourers have 'blind spots' which are mutually irritating.

If productivity is to be increased with the willing co-operation of labour, the farmer needs to realise that labour needs information on which to make rational assessments on the various factors involved. Most farmers would find it very embarrassing to reveal the comparative incomes of himself and his labourers. Many labourers would find it difficult to understand the cost of production and expected returns in a given operation, especially when market prices are variable from season to season. Yet a direct link between work undertaken and income received makes sense.

Practical steps in bridging the gap between farmer and staff - Areas of discussion

1. What do the labourers consider a fair wage?
2. How would they define a fair day's work for a fair wage?
3. What hours of work would they choose? e.g. 8 or 9 hours: 2 hours off in midday in summer, and so on.
4. In a given operation should there be a direct link between work undertaken and income received? e.g. bonuses on crops marketed or income from animals, etc.
5. What are other priorities which concern labour? e.g. housing, electricity, water, etc.

CONCLUSION

1. Labour is an unrealised asset in the farming industry. At present it is often considered the most expensive farming 'cost', and used as a relatively inefficient 'mechanical' aid to farming.

2. Because of this farmers are turning to more efficient 'mechanisation' and there is a steady drain of men, wealth and that indefinable sense of 'community' which was so valuable a part of country life.
3. To make labour more productive is not just a simple equation of: better pay and living conditions = more efficient work, although it helps increase production from many labourers who are at present trying to do a heavy day's work on an inadequate diet.
4. To make labour an intelligent partner in a joint enterprise requires consultation, in-job training, better farm planning and the development of a more equitable system of sharing the fruits of the land with the people who produce it.

FOLLOWING THE PAPER SOME QUESTIONS WERE PUT TO MRS. ELLIOTT AND HERE ARE HER REPLIES

Q.1 Could you tell us more about how efforts to improve conditions of living and work often prove "counterproductive" ?

Answer : When a farmer raises wages - usually only minimally - he expects some positive response - preferably in better attitudes to work. He seldom gets it. When he tries to improve the housing - again, not always very impressively - he may hope that some of the growing sons of his older employees will have a sense of loyalty and come and work for him. It doesn't seem to work.

However, this is not to say that the Labour doesn't appreciate a 'good' boss, and once when I asked my domestic staff to find out about the wages and conditions of work on the surrounding farms, the results were fascinating. (This was a good many years ago, and I report from memory). They told me the wages and said "This farmer supplies free milk", or "That farmer gives overalls, boots and other clothes at Christmas time to the 'boys' ". They listed many positive 'perks' that I had felt they could easily have overlooked.

Q.2 You refer to "increasing mechanisation" and say "the number of people employed on the land drops". Can you give more details about what sort of mechanisation you observe and what sort of numbers are involved ?

Answer : I can only speak of 'mechanisation' in this area. When I first came to the farm in 1955, my husband had 13 men working for him, full-time. He now has 7. (Last year it was 8, but one retired). This one-third drop in the labour force is almost universal in this area and it is directly attributable to the lining of the water canals with cement. Not only has this cut the time it takes to irrigate from 10 days to a week (for the complete valley) but each farmer in lining his own furrows has cut down on the amount of heavy work. Many farmers are turning to chemical weed-control and this has cut down on the amount of manual labour required, some of it was done by wives and children.

I ask myself 'Where have all the people gone, since the population growth is rocketing?' (And government policy has been rigidly against letting men leave the land). I might say here that with industry clamouring for labour and labour clamouring to go to the towns, somehow, in spite of every regulation to the contrary, blacks have gone, and I did not enquire too deeply how this was achieved. Droughts also enabled men to find work on the railways, etc., but in this area, there is a large and presumably growing number of black commuters, who leave home at 4.30 am to catch the 5.30 am train, they then catch the 7 pm train in the evening which arrives at 8 pm, many of them getting their evening meal about 8.40 pm. It is a soul destroying work

pattern which goes on for years. A lot of Coloured men do this as well.

Q.2 We'd like to know more about the "time for the job" arrangement.

Answer : I only know of one farmer who did a systematic job of 'Time for the job'. He allocated each labourer 1000 trees to scuffle and care for (joining banks and levelling). They had to complete the scuffling each month, and when it was finished the men were paid and went home. In theory they could then do their own thing, and I gather some finished the work in two weeks, with the help of their families. Others took the whole month but set their own times. I don't know if he is still using this method.

Q.4 Are African workers on farms in your area unemployed or underemployed ?

Answer : Yes, I definitely think African farm labour is 'underemployed' in the sense that a very great deal more work could be done and the land could be very much more productive if labour was more productive. What worries me is that a farmer, in substituting other forms of mechanisation for his farming operations is increasing the capitalisation of his farm to uneconomic levels, while loosing what, in my opinion, could be his most valuable asset, the men who work for him.

I realise I lay myself open to question about increasing the productivity of a given farm, but it is my observation that in this area farmers don't really bother to utilise small patches of land of one or two morgen with cash crops, etc., because firstly, he doesn't look critically enough at his farming operation and wonder how he can improve it. Secondly, he doesn't plan properly, either in the long term, or in the day by day, job by job activities. (For example : a farmer will decide to do a given job, he will have 2 or 3 men standing round 'helping' (or watching). Also, because he failed to plan the job and tell the men the day before, each labourer wastes about half-an-hour EVERY day getting to the job he will be doing on that day. (I don't think ours is the only farm where this happens). Thirdly, because of this, he hasn't time to take on 'extra' farming operations.

Q.5 Are the "traditional" arrangements on the farms that you refer to linked with the survival of African traditional social custom and activities ?

Answer : There are no traditional social activities any longer except drinking and extra-mural sex activity. I have heard two African men lament the break-up of community traditions because the people no longer have the livestock to perform the proper rites associated with puberty, marriage, death, etc. Mr. Hloyi was one of the men, and a school principal was another, who described how the people have lost many customs because of this.

With the loss of these community customs has not come a compensatory growth in recreational activity. There are rugby clubs, but to play this sport involves the maximum of dedication - there being few grounds : jerseys cost over R80, and to play interclub sport involves the players hiring transport at from R5 to R20 a game.