



Better Boss: Essays on Employee Management

Chris Blanchard | Fall, 2015

Ten Thoughts about Employees

1. Happy employees are productive employees - and productive employees are happy employees.
2. The right tools plus the right people equals maximum productivity.
3. The boss sets the tone and sets an example.
4. The boss is never tired. Even if she is.
5. Be certain going in that what you say you want is what you really want. If you have a partner, discuss this with them.
6. Some people are fast. Some are not. You probably can't do much to make dramatic changes, so figure it out before you hire. After you hire, either find a way to deal with what you've got, or change what you've got. Only two choices.
7. Be clear about goals and be clear about standards- and make those standards quantifiable. 50 bunches per hour. No more than 3 cercospora leaf spots on a Swiss chard leaf.
8. Be certain. Don't tell people to "do their best"... describe best. Don't make a big deal about changes in procedures- it makes even good employees think they know as much as you.
9. Poor performance by one employee drags management and labor down.
10. If you have a partner, be certain you agree on goals and procedures. Anything else encourages dissent and confusion.

Crew Leadership

Fifteen Minutes

People feel better when they do things right. Unfortunately, conveying expectations about just how to do a job can confound even experienced managers – especially if you have inexperienced workers with very little idea of what a successful outcome looks like.

Even for experienced workers, incomplete instructions on the part of a supervisor can result in poor performance, even if they have done exactly what they understood needed to be done.

When you give somebody a new task, make it a point to check back in fifteen minutes later. That's enough time for somebody to get started, but not enough time to do too much damage in most situations. Make it clear that it isn't a matter of trust – you want to be certain you've conveyed the instructions and parameters correctly.

Management is its own job, and you only get the results you want by managing.

A Practical Template for Crew Leadership

Leadership and supervision come naturally to some people, but for many others, the act of inspecting and correcting feels foreign and klutzy - something that's often exacerbated by the fact that young people interested in working on organic vegetable farms often come from one anti-authoritarian perspective or another. The very act of monitoring other people's work is not something most people learn in school, and telling somebody that their bunches of beets are too small, that their hoeing is too imprecise, or that they simply need to pour the crates into the brush washer a little faster, strikes right at the core of our own insecurities.

It gets much more difficult when our farms grow to a size where we need other people to step into this role.

At a practical level, the leader of a crew - whether it's the farmer or somebody she has designated - needs to understand their role. Often it's two-fold: do the job, and supervise everybody else doing the job. With so much on their plate, crew leaders can benefit from having some protocols for facilitating the best possible outcomes from the people whose performance they are responsible for.

Be the Anchor - First, a crew leader should, as much as possible, position herself at the end of any production line, so that she can check quality and direct changes. For example, if you're working the brush washer with your crew, be in the position of closing the boxes, rather than pouring the cucumbers in. This allows you to monitor the cleanliness and the quality of the resulting product. Likewise, if your crew is bunching beets and setting them on the ground, be the person counting the beets into boxes.

Less Talk, More Do - When giving directions, remember that you don't have long. Experiential educators - the folks that take teenagers hiking or do jobs training in the garden - know that you've got to get your message across quickly. Yes, it's valuable to provide context, but it's just as important to get things moving. Provide context and training as you go. One of the most dispiriting things for a new manager is talking to a crew and seeing the blank stares you often get in return. We learn best when our bodies are in motion, so hit the highlights and get going.

Fifteen Minutes - Once a job is started, come back fifteen minutes later to make sure that things are going well. Give your workers the best instructions you can, then let them have some time to work

things out. The first five minutes of a new job are often spent getting into the rhythm, the next five are right on, then the five minutes after that some of the instructions are forgotten. By coming back after fifteen minutes, you are inserting yourself at the right time to make corrections: before things have gone off the rails, but after problems have had a chance to surface.

Thirty Minutes - If at all possible, check in every thirty minutes after that. If you have to seed carrots down the road while your crew is picking chard, you probably won't be able to pull this off (but don't leave before that fifteen-minute check-in!). If you're working near your crew, take the time to make an inspection. If you're working the line with your crew, that thirty minutes is a good reminder to get your head out of the doing the work and to take a moment to focus on how things are going as a team - are we moving at the right pace? Are we getting the turnips clean enough?

(By the way, you need a timepiece - and one that's not your cell phone. Especially if you have a smart phone, it's difficult to check the time without checking something else. Put one on your wrist or on your belt loop so that you can see it without having to dig in your pocket - it's a good reminder that farming is all about timeliness, for you and your workers)

Monitor and Correct Course - Leaders have to be willing to monitor performance and correct course when necessary. If you aren't willing to do that, you can't function effectively as a manager. You absolutely have to be willing to state the standard ("At ABC Farm, we expect everybody to bunch at least 50 bunches of kale an hour."), comment on deviations from the standard ("You're bunching 30 bunches an hour."), and provide leadership on how to achieve the standard ("If you put the tote next to your right hand, you won't be reaching across your body to put the kale bunches in it. That will make a big difference."). If you're not willing to do that, you need a different role.

An important part of monitoring is to keep an eye on when you expect a job to be done, and whether you have the resources, such as twist ties and totes, to finish the job. For some people, this is second nature - they just always seem to have an idea of how long a job is going to take, and they're usually pretty close. I'm not one of those people, so I recommend making this estimate thirty minutes into a job ("We've bunched 300 bunches of kale in thirty minutes... we need 750 bunches, so we should be done in about forty-five minutes"), and again when the job is halfway done ("We're halfway through the bed of zucchini, and we've filled 25 crates. We only brought forty with us, so we need to figure out how to get more out to the field.").

You can use these tools as guidelines to keep in mind, or as a checklist to make sure you're on track. Sometimes it's helpful to use a more rigid structure ("I must check in with the crew exactly fifteen minutes after I've finished providing the initial instructions.") as a way to establish new patterns. Once you get the habit firmly entrenched, a more casual approach may be suitable.

A Mnemonic for Keeping a Task Moving

When you're working with a crew, slowing down or stopping work is bad. It disrupts a crew's mojo, threatens timelines, and costs money (if you have a crew of six stopped for ten minutes, that's an hour's worth of wages).

The best farm crews I've worked with don't let the work stop, but too many crews and too many crew leaders are willing to let a job come to a stop when something disrupts the work - most often, the lack of supplies like totes or twist ties, or the the need to move product out of the field.

Of course, it's better to keep ahead of crew and product needs, but when a bump in the road looms ahead or suddenly appears, it's worth asking three key questions:

What resources do I have to keep this job going? If I'm out of the right harvest containers, are there other containers I can use? If I'm out of twist ties, can we pick product into containers and bunch later?

Can I get more resources to keep this job going? Especially in a larger operation, can you call on somebody else to get you resources so that your crew can keep on working - this is almost always going to be faster than fetching the resources yourself.

How can I make productive use of this time? If a break in the job at hand is unavoidable, find a way to make the highest use of the available time. Can you prep for the remaining work to do - for example, can you strip bad leaves from the chard plants you are going to harvest when the containers get back to the field? Estimate the time involved in the break - should the crew move to the shade to rest, or should they wait by the tractor? Find another way to be productive - is there some hand-weeding or plant maintenance nearby to tackle?

Having these questions at hand, or training crew leaders to answer them, can help keep things moving, even when things are hot and frustrating (or wet and miserable).

Transition Times

When I was in high school, I spent a couple of years running triathlons. This was back in the early heady days of the sport, when the whole idea of stacking swimming, biking, and running together was relatively new. I spent hours poring over the pages of Triathlete magazine trying to divine the secrets of how to improve my swimming stroke or the right way to move my foot during a pedal stroke. And because I lived in Seattle at the time, I spent day after day during the dark and rainy winter on my bike on the indoor trainer, watching Scott Tinley and Scott Allen run the Ironman again and again and again on a VHS tape of the Wide World of Sports.

The Ironman consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike, and a 26.2 mile run (I ran considerably shorter versions of a triathlon). The best competitors finish in a little over eight hours, while the course is open for a total of seventeen hours on race day. As you can imagine, the television coverage of somebody swimming 2.4 miles or biking alone for 112 miles just isn't all that exciting.

What was exciting, though, was the transition from one part of the event to the other. A competitor would emerge from the water and dash along the sand to a huge field of bicycles, find the right aisle and stall for his bike, sit down on the pavement to slip into biking cleats, strap on a helmet, get on the bike,

and head off. Hours later that same competitor would come in from the bike ride, dismount, park the bike, sit down on the pavement to switch from bike cleats to running shoes, remove the helmet, and start off on a run that for most people would be a lifetime accomplishment.

It was an amazing flurry of gear and limbs between hours of monotony, and I was somewhat surprised to learn that the world-class triathletes worked hard to optimize the process – Shoes or helmet first? Laces or velcro? The best way to get on and off the bike? – and actually practiced their transitions.

Transitions matter – and not just because the spread between first and second place at the Ironman occasionally comes down to seconds instead of minutes. Yes, transitions take time, but they also put together the pieces needed to make the next segment work (if you’ve ever tried running with improperly tied shoes or a folded over tongue, you’ll know what I mean).

Perhaps more importantly, they set the tone for the next segment of the work.

Depending on the day and the farm, market farming can seem like nothing but transitions, from the small – “We’re done harvesting the salad mix, let’s move onto the radishes.” – to the large – “Summer is coming to an end and we’re shifting from harvesting what we need week by week to really bringing in the harvest.” – to the huge – “We’re moving from this piece of property to that new one over there.”

Here’s what I learned about transitions from watching the Ironman:

- **Plan for your transitions.** The more you can think through what’s involved switching from one thing to another, the better you’ll perform: in a race, you certainly don’t want to have any confusion about which way to turn as you come out of the bike corral. Don’t arrive at the end of the salad mix harvest without knowing what the next job is and how you’re going to get the crew from here to there and what needs to happen along the way – are you driving or walking? Do you need to move tools? If you’re heading back to the packing house with the crew, how long do you want to take for bathroom and water breaks? If you’re transitioning between seasons, what equipment are you going to park (and where) and what are you going to get out?
- **Have what you need ready to go.** You don’t want to have to gather harvest containers and knives while your crew waits, so have the tools that you need waiting for you. For bigger transitions – such as those between seasons – make sure you have the necessary tools and equipment ready well ahead of needing them. October is not the time to be fixing the root harvester, and May is not the time to perform annual maintenance on the flame weeder.
- **Manage the resources you’re transitioning.** When you’re getting off the bike after 112 miles to begin running a marathon, you don’t expect the muscles in your body to make a snappy transition – instead, you spend the last few miles of the bike ride spinning pedals backwards and stretching the back and arms in preparation for the run. The same is true for managing the people in a transition. Can you send two people ahead to the next job before the current one is

finished, so that you have less people standing around after their crates are full on the current task? Should somebody start putting crates on the wagon while everybody else finishes?

- **Pace matters.** It's probably not necessary in every situation to run from one crop to the next (although that might be kind of fun), but making transitions into a deliberate process can help everybody maintain momentum. Starting and stopping require time and attention, and keeping things in motion, even if you're changing direction, can reduce the effort required to slow down and speed up a task.

In a triathlon, managing transitions well doesn't make up for a lack of time spent training for the athletic portion of the event, but it can go a long way towards creating a feeling of calm control and setting a tone of efficiency; and occasionally, it can make the difference between winning a race or not. On a farm, managing transitions well won't make up for slow pickers, bad attitudes, or a general lack of timeliness, but it can make a tremendous difference in the way the next piece of work turns out.

Measuring Employee Performance

Employee performance is a function of outcomes compared to expectations.

If you want to get all math about it, Employee Performance = $f(\text{outcomes/expectations})$.

You can't evaluate employee performance without the ability to measure outcomes against defined expectations. If you haven't been clear about your expectations, you don't have any ability to evaluate outcomes - and more importantly, employees don't have a way to measure their own performance.

And ambiguity breeds poor performance.

When employees and teams fail to meet your expectations, the first question to ask yourself is, "Was I clear about my expectations?"

Defining the Work

Is It Part of the Job?

We all want to spend more time focused on the things we want to focus on. We want to farm, not (pick one or more) clean the packing shed, do the bookkeeping, fill out the records, market CSA shares...

Likewise, our employees want to get their jobs done - they want to bag the spinach, pick the chard, transplant the broccoli, rather than keeping the records and adjusting the transplanter.

Too often, critical tasks end up being "not the job." I've seen large farms without records, discovered fields of freshly transplanted lettuce with the top of the soil block sticking out of the soil, and irrigation

running with only half of the sprinklers turning - but at least the water was on, the lettuce wasn't in the greenhouse, and the crops were getting harvested!

On my own farm, critical tasks often didn't get the attention they were due, because they were treated as extras until the moment they had to be done - writing CSA newsletters, bookkeeping, greasing zerks on machinery, even the record-keeping (and we had a reputation to uphold!).

It didn't change until we began to make things "part of the job." Rather than writing CSA newsletters after the kids were in bed the night before deliveries, we began to dedicate time early in the week. I set up a system to rapidly sort bills and receipts as they came in to make bookkeeping easier, and set aside an hour a week to entering them into QuickBooks. We developed a system of written plans and instructions that were incorporated into the same sheet of paper where the records were kept, so that the record-keeping was already in the same place as the work that was being done.

We also worked to be clear about what the job actually was: harvest wasn't finished until the quantities and fields were recorded in the right place; and we stopped just "getting the lettuce out" and "getting the irrigation running" and started defining what done looked like.

To make something "part of the job," you need to do one of two things: dedicate time and resources, or make the task inseparable from the work.

Delegate by Focusing on Outcomes

Every growing farm has had to struggle with letting go of tasks and responsibilities. I haven't met many people for whom delegation comes easily. Farmers especially suffer from the understanding that they are the best person to do the job, and the conviction that nobody can do it as well as they can.

For effective delegation, remember that people thrive on two main things at work: knowing what's expected of them, and having what they need to do the job. If you can provide those two things, you've gone a long ways towards effective delegation.

When you really flesh out what's expected when you delegate a task, you give people an important tool for figuring out the variables on their own. To do this, focus on the objective of a task, rather than the method. Objectives are rarely one-dimensional, like, "wash the carrots." Instead, they usually have multiple variables that contribute to achieving a successful outcome: "wash the carrots so that that they look ready to eat without any further cleaning, keep the leaves in good condition, pack them 18 to a tote in alternating layers of three; you should be able to do these 120 bunches in one-and-a-half hours. When you are done, put them on the market pallet in the cooler."

How will I know when I'm done washing the carrots? When they are clean enough to eat and the bunches are packed into totes as described and put away. How will I know if I did a good job? If the carrots are ready to eat, the tops are clean and in good condition, and I finished in less than 90 minutes.

When you give people what they need to do their job well, you set them up for success. What do they

need? They need resources: information, tools, and time.

Tools: Give people the tools they need to do their job right - and make sure you include how to use them in your instructions. The best tools almost tell the worker how to use it without any further instruction (see this video for an example of how to use an asparagus knife: <https://youtu.be/EE-ng8wvdhU>). Take the time when you are delegating a task to remind workers of the tools they will need - and be as specific as necessary - don't just tell them to "get a hoe" when you want the work done with a collinear hoe, and they should remember to carry a sharpener with them.

Time: Too often, we delegate tasks without sufficient time for the worker to get them done. Remember that what takes you fifteen minutes to get done may take a newbie thirty minutes or more. And it really helps to know what you can expect from your employees. Measure how long it takes this year to equip yourself better to provide guidance in the future - if you consistently underestimate how long it will take a worker to complete a task, you set them up for failure and disappointment.

Information: When you delegate a task, work hard to give the right amount of information about how to do the job, as well as the desired outcomes. A neophyte carrot washer will need a different level of instructions about the best way to get the job done than somebody who's been washing carrots all summer.

Think as well about the obstacles a worker might face in completing their job. "If you run the pressure washer at too much pressure, you'll rip up the carrots; if it's set too low, you won't be able to get them clean."

And remember to ask right up front: "Do you have any questions?" You're probably delegating tasks so that you can get on to other things, but taking time in the moment to provide all of the necessary information will save you time and money in the end.

On a similar note, make sure that you check back in on a delegated task in fifteen minutes. That's enough time for somebody to get started, but not enough time to do too much damage in most situations.

Here's an inherent contradiction that you won't be able to get around: new workers tend to come onto the farm when your work is tremendously time critical - precisely when you can't afford to give detailed instructions. But just like putting seeds in the ground, providing good information to new workers is an investment in the future. (Also, just like putting seeds in the ground, the more you've been able to think this through in the winter, the better you'll be able to execute a plan for transmitting information.)

Self Management

First Responses

I once had a trained wilderness first responder tell me that when they had trained in disaster response, his instructor had told them on first arriving at the scene of a disaster, responders should first stop and smoke a cigarette.

During the five minutes that it takes to light up and smoke down, the responder has time to assess, observe, and plan for how to create the best outcome in a stressful and chaotic situation. Otherwise, a wilderness first responder might find themselves trying to save somebody who can't be saved while somebody who could have been saved worsens to a point where they can't; or doing CPR instead of calling in a helicopter; or failing to remove injured people and themselves from an ongoing threat.

We deal with small "disasters" on the farm all the time, whether it's a crew standing around talking when they should be working, a crate of dirty carrots that got stacked with the clean ones going to market, or a door that got ripped off the field van when somebody backed up with it open. I don't recommend smoking a cigarette every time you discover something isn't the way it should be, but I do recommend taking the time to figure out what's going on, assess the situation for what it is and the outcome you want to create, and figure out how you're going to get it.

Before you jump in to try to fix a problem, it's important to create the space between stimulus and response so that you don't create additional unexpected problems, and so that you can respond with actions that move you further towards your larger goals, rather than just relieving the pressure.

PICNIC Problems

Over the years, I've spent some time dabbling in the world of FileMaker database design. (Maybe more than dabbling - I built several databases for my own use when I organized presentations for the MOSES Organic Farming Conference and for managing my farm, and helped design and implement a large project for event and customer management at MOSES.) Recently, I was reminded of a problem that I learned about through the database world - the PICNIC problem.

Sometimes, computer-techie types run into problems that they just can't solve through programming, file structuring, or procedure writing. Often, this is a PICNIC problem - Problem In Chair, Not In Computer.

In any case... I was working on some computer-y issues this past week and getting very frustrated - to the point where I actually picked up the phone to call customer service to try to get some help, whereupon I promptly discovered that the problem was staring me right in the face.

Problem in chair, not in computer.

I spent a lot of time on my farm assuming that the problem was external - that the workforce was lazy,

that this one customer couldn't manage their inventory, that the tractor dealer didn't think I was important enough to make me a priority.

Over time - and through a lot of personal and professional pain - I learned that as the manager of the farm, the solutions had to lie with me. Employees not doing what I want them to do? I needed to give them better tools, better structures, and better motivations to get what I wanted out of them. Customer couldn't manage inventory? I needed to help them understand the dates in our lot code, inspect my product in their cooler, and share ways that other customers managed their inventory. Tractor dealer didn't think I was important enough? I needed to find a new tractor dealer.

Gradually, I learned that the problem was with me, not with the people and things that I was interacting with. And even if the problem really did belong to them, I had to take responsibility for making change.

(The funny thing about a PICNIC problem is that if the system design actually took into account human limitations, there wouldn't be a problem in the chair. Can you design your farm systems to take into account your own human limitations?)

Keep Greasing the Zerks

When the pressure's on, it becomes all too easy to skip the little things that keep things working. In the long days of June, make sure you take the time to grease the Zerk fittings, check the oil in the tractor at the beginning of every day, and tighten the bolts. No matter how fast the weeds are growing, and no matter how little time there is before the next rain, you've got to take the time to do the small things that make sure that the big things don't go massively wrong.

By the way, that goes for relationships just as much as it does for machinery.

Systems

Empty Holes

If you want people to work faster, set the pace for them.

The summer after high school, I worked on a fish processing ship in the Bering Sea. I stood in front of a belt of trays, and put the fish into the trays, heads down and belly to the right. I put 120 fish in the trays every minute, because that's how many trays went in front of me every minute. Nobody ever told me it was an option to go slower - the machine set the pace. Empty trays went by me, and I knew exactly what was expected of me.

Five years later, a farmer put me on a transplanter pulled behind an International 504. The 504 didn't have a creeper gear, although it did have a "torque amplifier" that slowed it down. When I told Richard that he was driving too fast for me to possibly keep up, he replied that the tractor was going as slow as I could go. The empty pockets on the transplanter told me very clearly what I needed to do. So I learned to keep up, and to do what the machine expected of me.

The water wheel transplanter that I bought at Rock Spring Farm didn't help our fastest workers set plants any faster. But it set the pace for slower workers, and encouraged them to keep up. The empty holes in the soil were there to be filled, so the holes got filled before they disappeared behind the workers.

Empty trays, missed pockets, and blank holes create a dissonance for workers that moving slowly down a field doesn't. With a machine, the feedback is baked right into the system. Workers see, second by second, exactly what the expectations are for the speed of their work. It provides a far more immediate feedback than counting how many beds or bunches are completed every hour.

(The same thing can be accomplished without a machine if you provide shoulder-to-shoulder leadership to your workers. When you work alongside your employees to show them how fast and how well a job can be done - and continue to do so while the job gets done - you create much the same effect as the empty trays on the file machine belt.)

Sliding Scales

Culling is hard work – especially for an employee on a small farm. Not only is said employee likely to have a cultural inclination towards saving and using everything possible – hippies and immigrants tend to share this trait – but culling on a vegetable farm is almost always inherently difficult work.

Most culling is done on a qualitative basis – “Don't put any bad tomatoes in the box!” To get people to do what you want with culling, it pays to make it quantitative: No leaf in a Swiss chard bunch has more than three cercospora lesions of more than 1/8th inch, any one lesion more than 1/4 inch, or more than 10 lesions of any size; no tomato for wholesale has more than 2 inches of cracks, or any blackening of a crack, or any crack that is more than 1/8th-inch wide. “Throw out the squishy ones” just doesn't do much good as a directive.

All of this gets a lot easier when most of the product makes the grade. When you have a high percentage of good widgets, identifying the ones that don't make the grade is pretty easy. As the percentage of good widgets goes down, it gets harder and harder to judge what to throw out, and what to keep. The line between good and not-good gets a lot fuzzier as the number of culling factors goes up: “This one has a 1-inch crack, and another crack that's awfully close to 1/8th inch, and maybe a little black in that one?”

Try to set the stage for less culling. If cercospora is endemic in your Swiss chard, plant more successions; what you spend in land will be made up for in labor. If you have problems with tomato cracking, manage your water, or consider harvesting the tomatoes slightly less ripe and finishing them off the vine. Nobody really likes to say “no,” so make it easier to say “yes.”

Surveillance

We used to have a problem with counting. Every week, the harvest and packing logs would say that we had 180 bunches of Swiss chard, but we'd have 178. Either way, each week the CSA line would grind to

a halt, and we would scurry around to harvest a couple of additional bunches, which wouldn't get properly washed and chilled before we packed them into the remaining CSA boxes.

Or we'd have 210, meaning that 30 got composted because they didn't have a home.

I tried emphasizing that getting the count right mattered. I talked about quality. I talked about 30 composted bunches represented wasted money and wasted resources. I explained how it held up the CSA line. I pleaded. And nothing worked.

Finally, I added a new column to the harvest and packing logs where the person responsible for the count and the quality wrote his or her initials. I was certain that this would provide me with the tools I needed to find the responsible people and take corrective - or even disciplinary! - action. I had every expectation that I would soon have the opportunity to open a big ol' can of whoop-ass and solve this problem.

But that didn't happen. Instead, suddenly, every count was right. It didn't just improve, it changed completely. We went from regularly mis-counting items to nailing the count time after time.

As a result, I implemented this accountability all over the farm, anywhere we were keeping records or requiring tasks to be done. Pallet stacking sheets, closing checklists, tractor work directives, and bathroom cleaning logs all came with a place for the responsible worker to make his or her mark.

A recent article in the New York Times shared the results of a study that monitored restaurant employee behavior for signs of theft. The surveillance did cut down on theft, but it also had the surprising side effect of encouraging employees to do the right thing: savings from theft were modest, but after installing the monitoring software, the revenue per restaurant increased by an average of 7 percent. Workers pulled back on unethical practices, but they also put more efforts into things like prompting customers to have dessert or a second beer. No whoop-ass necessary.

Monitoring employee performance, whether actively by tracking productivity or passively by requiring accountability, changes behavior. The same people making mistakes, moving slowly, or simply not making the effort to do their job well can be set up to succeed. And that's a win for everyone.

Employee Problems

What Do You Do If They Don't Do the Work?

We recently hosted a field day at Rock Spring Farm on the subject of saving labor on the market farm. Inevitably, the discussion at the end of the day – once we had moved into the shade of the packing house – turned to managing employees.

As I described the systems we use to communicate with employees about desired outcomes and the parameters for success, a beginning farmer asked, “But what do you do if they simply don't do the

work?”

I hear variations of this question a lot at farming conferences. I suppose it strikes right at the heart of the local, sustainable produce grower’s dilemma when it comes to hiring people: I grow this food not to get rich, but to make a difference in the world and in people’s lives. I hire people at relatively low wages to do hard, hot, and dirty work that few Americans really want to do. And I depend on them to do the work. Big corporations treat food and people like ingredients and automatons – so shouldn’t I be different?

It all begs the question, why do you hire people? I have a short answer for that: You hire them to make you money.

Put everything else aside for a moment. Forget that you like to surround yourself with people. Forget that you are training young people to be farmers, or to appreciate where their food comes from. Forget being a job creator, a sympathizer with the workers, or a role model.

That’s all good stuff, but fundamentally, you hire people to make you money. To keep your farming business alive. To further your own goals, ignoble and noble alike.

That doesn’t make you a bad person. And it doesn’t mean you have to behave poorly. It does mean that you have to do *your* job as a manager.

When I have an employee who isn’t doing the work I’ve asked them to do, or isn’t performing to the standards I’ve set, I sit down and ask myself:

- **Have I outlined the desired outcomes and principles for success?** In other words, did I tell the employee to go weed the herbs, or did I provide instructions that every inch of bare soil needed to be scuffed and all weeds uprooted in the south three beds of perennial herbs in field 112?
- **Have I provided the tools they need to do their job?** Did I use my knowledge of my farm and my resources to direct them to the right hoe? Did I provide a field map so that they knew exactly where I expect them to work? Did I provide the training for how to use the tools, and how to sharpen them, and how to work efficiently?

If I’ve done these two things – in other words, if I have done my own job as a manager – and the employee isn’t doing the work that I need done, I resort to a short, verbal reprimand. At Rock Spring Farm, we try our best to use one-minute praisings and one-minute reprimands where appropriate, per the short and excellent [One Minute Manager](#). Often, we’ll combine a reprimand with a little bit of re-training: “If you hold the hoe like this, you can slide it under the soil like this.”

If the reprimand doesn’t work, a verbal warning is in order. At the end of the day, I will pull the poor-performing employee aside and tell them in no uncertain terms that their job is on the line. I include

exactly why, and exactly what will need to be done by the employee in what timeframe in order to keep her job. (That timeframe has a lot to do with the length of an employee's tenure. Seasonal workers who are only on the farm for ten weeks don't get much time to fix performance issues.)

More often than not, this simply doesn't work. If an employee's work hasn't improved after reprimands and re-trainings, it's probably not going to improve at all. But I feel an obligation to let an employee know exactly what is on the line *before* letting them go.

If the verbal warning *does* work, it's important to communicate that to the employee – they need to know that their head is off the chopping block.

If it doesn't work, it's time to let them go.

Don't Make People Miserable

Every so often – especially as pea-picking season winds up and the bean-picking season gets started - I'll hear a farmer or a manager say, "I'll just make that person so miserable they'll quit. That way I don't have to fire them."

I think this approach stinks.

First, it's mean. And it lets everybody else on your crew or staff know that they don't know where they stand. If you consistently dump somebody on the garbage jobs without telling them what's going on, you aren't just making them miserable, you're demonstrating your inability to communicate clearly about your expectations and to hold people accountable for meeting them.

Second, it's cowardly. Yes, firing people is a difficult thing to do. Get over it. You're the boss. It's your job to do the hard things, especially the emotionally hard things. Anybody can muck out a pig pen, but it's another matter entirely to have a frank discussion with an employee about the termination of their employment.

Don't make people miserable. Cut them free so that both of you can get on with it. It's uncomfortable, horrible, and one-hundred percent the right thing to do.

Five Great Investments for Your Farm

I like farming toys as much as the next farmer, and when you ask me, "What should my next investment be for my farm?" I'm as tempted as anybody to provide a listing of various configurations of metal and grease that, if properly applied, would be the perfect tool to address the situation.

But more often than not, I'd be wrong.

More often than not, you'd be better off investing your time and energy into...

Improving the information you have about your farm - How much does it cost you to grow a pound of carrots? What are your fixed costs per acre of field production? How long does it take your crew - average, high, and low - to harvest a hundred bunches of kale? What's your average per-acre (or per-square foot) yield on carrots? What's your current ratio, and how does that compare to last year? How much did you spend to grow the vegetables that went into your CSA share?

Improving the information you have about your craft - What don't you know about growing vegetables, feeding chickens, or raising cows? If you don't know the basics of your craft, figure out where you can go to learn it - and keep in mind that this might not be your normal round of conferences! State and regional producer associations often have workshops about improving the fundamentals by people who are focused on fundamentals over philosophy. Take a class. Attend field days.

Creating systems - You already have ways that you get things done. What can you do to make them better? If there are places where things consistently go wrong, spend time digging in there and figuring out what you need to make things right - more often than not, it's going to be a minor investment or a change in procedures.

Cleaning and clarifying workspaces - It's such a small thing, but working with even slightly chaotic workspaces and storage areas takes a huge toll on productivity and worker perspective. Clean, bright work areas with obvious storage spaces for tools can ease workloads - and perceived workloads - tremendously. If you've ever had a worker spend two hours during a rare dry spell looking for the right piece of metal to make the transplanter work (that was me), or torn your hair out with frustration while a crew tried to find a harvest knife for the last worker, you've seen the incredible toll this can take on a farm's bottom line.

Close open loops - Farms tend to be filled with almost-finished projects. Wrap them up and get rid of the extra parts, drop them off the to-do list, and get them out of your head. You'll free up mental energy to focus on the work that makes a difference, and the physical space that keeps your workers (and you) from having to work around, under, and over that undone thing and the junk that's hanging around to get it done.

What can you do with the time you would have spent researching new toys? What if you spent the money you were going to spend on something new on refining what you've got?

Another Perspective on Management

I really like this definition of management: the organization and coordination of resources and activities to achieve a defined outcome.

But how do you do it?

You plan. You monitor. And you control. If necessary, you make a new plan.

If I want to go to buy groceries, I make a plan for how to get there: I'm going to head down East Washington to Baldwin and turn left, then turn right on Willy Street.

Then I get in the car and start driving. When I'm in the car, I monitor things at all different levels - I check the tires before I get in, and glance at the fuel gauge when I turn it on. I watch the speedometer. I check my mirrors every seven seconds. And as I drive down East Washington, I watch for the landmarks that tell me I'm getting close to Baldwin. I also pay attention to where the car is actually going - I'm almost always a little bit off to the left or to the right, and I make constant little corrections to stay on track.

If I stop paying attention to keeping the car on track - if I decide to send a text, or to check my email - suddenly a few seconds can go by and I'm waaaay off track, with potentially disastrous consequences. Constant monitoring and small corrections keep me on the road; when I stop monitoring and correcting, I've stopped managing, and suddenly things can careen crazily out of control.

(I went cold turkey on texting and emailing while driving over 18 months ago, and I'm still going strong. Nothing's that urgent.)

I want to monitor the right things at the right intervals. I don't need to check the fuel gauge as I drive down the road, and I don't need to check the oil every time I get in the car (at least, not in this car. I've had cars where it was prudent to do so).

If something happens that's very much not to plan - I miss my turn on Baldwin Street, or I run over a nail - I go back to square one and replan. This might mean that I need to turn someplace else (if I missed my turn), or that groceries are off the list of things to do today entirely (if I run over a nail).

Here are some monitoring schedules you might think about applying to your farm business (these are by no means meant to be exhaustive. Sorry.):

Crops

Daily - Do the transplants need water? Do freshly seeded or freshly transplanted crops need water?

Weekly - What needs to be done on the farm? Scout for pests. Scout for weeds and weeding opportunities. What's ready to harvest this coming week? In two weeks? What needs to be seeded or transplanted according to the plan? Did the transplants or seeds do what I expected them to do?

Yearly - How did the crops do? Did we perform according to plan? What went right, what went wrong? Do we need to plant more, or less, or earlier, or later?

Finances

Weekly - Are there bills to pay? Do I have money in my bank account? What's my credit card balance?

Monthly - Are there any outstanding receivables? Does the bank think I have as much money as I think I have? How is my financial plan working out?

Quarterly - What do I owe the government?

Yearly - What do I owe the government now? How have my assets, liabilities, and equity changed in the last year? Did I make progress last year?

People

Daily - How is the work going? Are staff meeting standards? Is heat or cold an issue to be addressed?

Weekly - How are my people doing? Are staff meeting standards? Are there people on the crew who shouldn't be? Do we need extra help? What's coming up for family events?

Monthly - Do people know how they're doing? What adjustments do we need to make? Am I spending enough time with my crew, my kids, my partner?

Yearly - Do I need more staff or less staff? Do we need to change the staff structure?

Yourself

Daily - Am I hydrated? Am I eating well? Am I giving attention to the things that need attention?

Weekly - What am I trying to accomplish right now? What do I need to do next? Am I getting enough sleep? How's my healthy? Is my allergy season coming up? Would a visit to the chiropractor now prevent a bigger problem soon?

Yearly - Am I doing what I want to be doing? Am I heading in the right direction?