

Coaching vs Evaluations to Improve Ag Employee Performance

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One of the most difficult things farm managers have to master is coaching employees. Coaching enables employers to optimize the performance they desire. Once mastered you will see employees that understand goals and expectations more clearly, are more motivated, taking ownership of their work, showing greater responsibility, along with maximizing their potential, talents and problem solving ability. What you as an employer receive is more productivity, lower employer turnover and being freed of the day-to-day micromanagement of employees.

For this to happen it often requires a mindset change on the part of the employer in terms of letting go of short-term control. Coaching is not creating anarchy, but instead empowering employees to think and act on their own as the need arises through teaching and leadership. It does require effort, patience, and insight into learning what makes your employees tick. Coaching is different from the evaluation process, which is typically only completed once a year. Coaching focuses on guidance and development of the employee by being proactive and positive. The employer must take the time to understand and determine the following:

- Each employee's unique strengths and weaknesses.
- What it will take to help the employee overcome any barriers to their success.
- Finding out what motivates each individual employee and tailoring incentives toward them.
- Communicating direction towards achieving company goals.
- Helping employees understand the big picture.
- Helping employees understand their individual role in the company's success.

When getting employees to improve their performance through coaching there are six critical steps involved.

1. Describe the situation in a professional non-confrontational manner. This discussion needs to be positive and done in a non-threatening manner. This is not the place to blame but instead uncover causes of the problem to work towards solutions. Listen to see if an employee understands the “why” in a situation. For example: Why the employee should handle livestock in a calm manner?
2. Discuss the causes of the problem. You need to remember this is a discussion about a performance problem, not about the employee’s attitude or personality. You need to remain friendly and relaxed throughout the conversation. Information should be gathered using open-ended questions which often start with words like “How”, “What”, “Who”, and “When” and cannot simply be answered yes or no. An example would be... “How did it go loading the fresh cows today in the parlor?”
3. Ask the employee’s help in solving the problem. In doing so you will get the employee’s commitment via asking them to decide what to do to solve the problem. In return you are boosting the employee’s self-esteem because you value their opinion and ideas. Continuing with the example: Discuss if there is a better way to initiate cattle movement. Or consider if there is an equipment design issue or something else impeding cattle movement.
4. Identify and write down a possible solution(s). By writing down the solution(s), you have a reference point to follow what will be done to solve the situation. If it doesn’t work, you can go to the next proposal. In doing so, involve the employee in choosing the best solution and identify their role in the solution.
5. Decide on a specific action to taken by everyone. By identifying specific actions and responsibilities for the solutions and writing it down it will emphasize that the responsibility for improvement rests with the employee.
6. Agree on a specific follow up date. By setting a date, it sends a message to the employee that solving the performance problem is important and it tells the employee that you want to know how well the actions agreed upon are being handled. It also allows for further follow up or tweaking to the problem if needed. As always, end the discussion on a friendly note.

Using appropriate coaching methods with employees will help you as a manager to achieve the desired employee performance you are looking for in your operation.



Caption:
Two people having a conversation, one being the herd manager and the other the employee in a dairy free stall barn.