

Back to Basics

Good Cow/Good Employee: Part 2 of a 3 part series on Ranch Labor

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Ranchers generally have no problem managing their four-legged bovine employees. Too often it is the two-legged human employee that is the challenge. Comparing the two, there are some similarities when it comes to management. In this issue of *Back to Basics* let's examine those similarities.

Every rancher has the "good cow." They can depend on that cow to be on the correct side of the fence, raise a good calf, breed back on time and have a good attitude. It's as if she knows her job and just does it. She cares for her newborn calf without assistance even when calving in inclement weather, always mothers-up quickly when changing pastures, and maintains good body condition year round.

Every rancher wants the "good employee." A good employee is much like that good cow. They know their job, do it to the best of their ability with a good attitude, ask questions when necessary and are dependable. Just as you have to "reward" the good cow with enough feed, a good bull, and a proper health program to stay productive, the good employee needs to be rewarded too.

Examine the economics of your operation and determine what wage you can afford to pay. The old saying, "You get what you pay for," certainly applies in this situation. Take a look at the number of hours an employee is asked to work. While everyone recognizes that ranching is a 24/7 job, the employee has no monetary equity in your ranch, only sweat equity. Expecting 24/7 from them year round is expecting too much.

Compare wages to the number of hours worked. For example if the base pay is \$1,500 per month and you ask the employee to work seven 8-hour days, the pay per hour is \$6.69. If you reduce the ranch work schedule to six 8-hour days, the wage increases to \$7.81 per hour. Your employees are doing this math and weighing their "in town" employment opportunities against the "at ranch" rate.

For those busy times of year when it is 24/7, like calving season, think "outside of the calving stall" and reward good employees. Employee incentives that work include longevity bonuses for finishing out the job or paid time off after the last calf is born. Other rewards could include beef for their freezer, registration paid for job-related educational meetings, or gift certificates to a favorite restaurant. Many times it isn't the reward as much as it is the recognition of a "job well done" that counts.

First-calf heifers need more inputs than mature cows such as feed, time and assistance. We all recognize that. New employees are like first-calf heifers. They kind of know what they are supposed to do, but are not always sure. New employees should

spend time working along side the manager or another seasoned employee and learn the job while getting familiarized with the ranch.

Initially managers might assist the new employee in their duties just as they assist a new calf to suckle for the first time or a heifer to mother up. New employees need to come on board before the “crisis.” This gives everyone time to acclimate, prepare and adjust before “crunch” time.

Not all first-calf heifers are excellent mothers their first year yet may miss the cull gate if a positive attitude is maintained and the cow shows potential by weaning a calf. New employees won't always do everything right the first time but if they show a positive attitude, good work ethic and potential, the manager is much more likely to hang on to that new employee.

Just as it takes time and effort to develop a weaned replacement heifer into a good solid aged cow who knows the ranch, it takes time and effort to develop a solid ranch employee. As a ranch owner or manager, are you willing to make the “OJT” (on the job training) investment? New hires are not going to absorb everything in a day so keep in mind it takes a commitment in the form of time and patience on your part.

Cows and employees both need care and attention. Trained, treated and managed correctly, both can make your ranch money, or at the minimum, make life more enjoyable. As you consider who is working on your operation, consider how you manage man and beast.

The authors invite you to participate in an educational program on labor. The program is scheduled for March 19 in Elko, Nevada and concurrently by interactive video at a location near you. See accompanying news release in this publication for additional interactive video locations and details.

That is enough for this month. As always, if you would like to discuss this article or simply would like to talk cows do not hesitate to contact Ron Torell at 775-738-1721 or at torellr@unce.unr.edu or Shannon Williams, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Agent in Lemhi County at 208-756-2824, shannonw@uidaho.edu