Employee Management and Real Reform

Employee management is key in any business' success. This is no secret and having motivated, knowledgeable and happy employees with real room for growth and advancement in their fields always adds to the bottom line.

Now it is a big election year and many of us in agriculture are wondering which candidate will help us the most, or do the least amount of damage, in the form of employee regulation reform or immigration reform.

As far as employee management, the dairy industry is constantly trying to adapt and innovate to the shrinking availability of experienced and willing workers.

Many of my clients have voiced frustrations on their inability to get workers that really want to advance in their careers and improve the farm for the owners and themselves who would both benefit financially. Having great employees promotes higher quality production and components, while inexperienced and lackadaisical employees harm the dairy and do the exact opposite.

There is a lot more talk about robotics and innovations in automation systems across the board: everything from rotary parlors with robotic udder handlers to dipping systems, cow sorters and automatic feeding systems.

These robotic technologies require expensive new construction that is not justifiable with the current milk pricing situation and until real automation becomes available to retro-fit older style barns,

Photo courtesy of Cornell PRO-DAIRY

dairy owners will be forced to find qualified workers or possibly be faced with the prospect of getting out of the business.

The election is upon us and both major candidates seem unaware of what really happens on America's farms. Non-technical agricultural jobs have been disdained for a long time by most American workers, mainly those jobs in the entry-level ag fields. Especially nowadays, relatively few citizens and the currently unemployed would voluntarily seek entry level work on a farm to learn and grow versus taking unemployment and other government benefits. These are direct observations from many of my clients that most of us can relate to.

For years, countries all over the world have sent immigrants to our farms, food processing plants, factories, oil fields, hotels and restaurants looking for better opportunities. Some have come here legally on work visas and some on tourist visas and never left. Yes, some immigrants have come here sneaking across one of our borders. The fact of the matter is that these workers are here now and a lot of them are willing to do the jobs that most legal citizens do not want.

This lack of understanding of our employment system has never been more apparent in our elected officials in Washington. The "Gang of Eight" created the Bipartisan Framework for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in their attempts to deal with the immigration crisis.

The current document punishes employers that have current employees willing to do the work with harsh fines and possibly criminal charges. It is in-

tolerable that current farm owners are backed up against the wall and poses unfair choices for them. Their choices are trying to maintain a legal skeleton crew on their farms or just get out of the business. And penalties for the employees would mean they would have to "register with the government" and pay any back taxes for prior years' work they already performed. This is something no human being would volunteer for.

With what looks like ill-fated attempts to revamp the entire immigration system, it appears that if two current problems were addressed, we could simplify the employment and immigration system.

First of all, worker visas could be issued for small administrative charges and not associated with any punishments or fines. Employers should be allowed to easily sponsor immigrant candidates to streamline the process. This can be done cheaply and with a non-intimidating approach for both employers and employees that would be obtained without the use of labor attorneys and CPAs filling out droves of regulatory papers.

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The worker visa card obtained with background checks using the E-Verify system already in place, once cleared, would allow the worker to be entitled to legally live and work in this country. Income taxes would be withheld to match that earned by a citizen and Social Security, Medicare and unemployment taxes would be withheld at the source. The rates need to be equal and fair to both American taxpayers and immigrant groups.

Second, implementing an employer sponsorship program to allow the worker visa cards to be issued to potential employees to get them on a permanent basis would be up to the employer's discretion and cleared by background check. This should work, because no employer willingly wants to hire illegal workers over legitimate workers. But our current system subsidizes and rewards non-working individuals while fining and punishing working and entrepreneurial spirits; a set up that will only take our economy down the hole faster.

No business owner should ever have to fear the government as a consequence of running a legitimate business and hiring employees, but that is what it seems we currently have now.

Implementing these two simple steps should yield impressive results where employees are not afraid to work here, can thrive on strengthening their skills and move up in the world, and employers can invest more money in technology and advancements to yield an abundant food supply for all of us. ✳

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