

Does Your Farm Work for You or Do You Work for the Farm?

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Who is the boss?

Have you ever yearned to get some time out but felt that you had too much to do? Do you have dreams that you can't achieve because money is just "too tight"? Can you remember the last time you laughed on the job?

If you are feeling uncomfortable about any of these questions then it's time to take control.

Chicken and egg!

Often we hear the saying, "Which comes first – the chicken or the egg?" There is a different slant you need to take on this topic depending on what stage of your farming career you are at. If you are hoping to purchase your first farm and build the base of your business then you definitely need to be *working for your farm*.

Once you reach the point where you have your base assets in place, you are in a position to *make the farm work for you*.

Starting out – working for your farm

Beginning a career in farming is exciting. There are many directions you can take. You may decide to be a professional manager or sharemilker or you might feel that the ultimate goal for you is farm ownership.

If you decide that being a farm owner is the path you want to follow then you will need to commit very strongly to working toward achieving this. This does not mean working 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. It means that you are going to have to make some sacrifices at this point in your career to be able to reap your rewards more quickly.

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When I refer to sacrifices, I am not suggesting you don't have a holiday – just that it might be more sensible to go camping than take a world trip right now. Do you really need a big brand new 4-wheel drive vehicle or does it serve the purpose of making you feel good? Getting to farm ownership has never been easy but I still see people doing it by delaying some rewards until later –believe me it works! You can't have your cake and eat it too, you can't have all your wants in life now and have them again later, life doesn't work that way.

Taking control

Being in charge is all about being in control and having choices, starting with the very simple things. What do you say to yourself when you wake up in the morning? Are you determined to enjoy the day ahead of you or are you cursing another dreaded day at work. Do you have a plan or do things just happen to you?

Business plan

A 'business plan' may sound like a very complicated document which is necessary for a large company, but a bit overkill for a farm manager. Believe me, if you don't have a plan, you will never know when you have achieved it! A plan does not have to be big and technical, it can be as simple as you want it to be. You *must* attach a budget to this plan to measure whether the plan is realistic – are these goals or are they merely dreams? When the next want jumps out in front of you, will you have the will-power to say with certainty, "That's not in my plan!"

If you don't have a plan, your dreams will be slowly stolen away from you!

Financial plan

Do you work for your banker or does he/she work for you? I do not intend this to be interpreted as a power struggle. Have you ever felt that the bank was on your back? Why would you feel this way? It would seem to me that you are not in control of your finances.

An agreement with a bank is a partnership. The bank puts the capital in for you to achieve your business plan. Borrowed capital is essential for you to firstly get into business and secondly to grow your business. The bank wants to be part of a team that helps you to achieve the plans you have in place – they will make money from you on the way and that is their reward for being involved with you.

Develop a clear understanding of your annual accounts – these are not merely recorded history or a pain in the rear end for estimating your tax liability.

Annual accounts, if used well, can be signposts to the future and major predictors of trends which will help you take control over the future direction of your farm.

Who gets paid first?

When budgeting, do you take what is left or do you decide what you need annually to achieve your plan. George S Classon wrote in 'The Richest Man in Babylon', "that 10% of all you earn is yours to keep". This can apply to any level of income and the sooner you begin, the larger the result. If you have identified what end result you need to achieve your business plan you will be less likely to give it away to a salesperson at the field days who shows you something you never thought about before but convinces you that it is a must have for your farm. You decide what your farm needs before someone else does it for you. You be the boss!

Design a system that works for you

If you have a clear picture of your farming *system* you will feel in control of your farm. You will *know* what to include in budgets, you will *know* what needs to be done on a daily, weekly and monthly basis and the farm will be less likely to take you over. Staffing must be at the right level to ensure that work pace is ideal.

What sort of system do you run? Do you have a clear picture or will you jump to the next bright idea? How will you decide on the next purchase – will you know if it fits with your system? Having a clear understanding of what system you are applying to your farm will put you in control of making the farm work for you.

Ensure your system is sustainable by working optimum hours

Will you be able to repeat your system next year, the following year or for the next 10 years without getting burned out? If you are doing it yourself or with your spouse or partner, make sure that you have a system that you can achieve in the hours available without wearing yourself out. Try to find a good relief milker or part time person who can allow you to get away occasionally.

If you employ staff ensure that you have the right number to do the job and make sure that the roster is well balanced for each to get time off.

Be realistic. There will be times of the years such as the spring and the middle of silage making that you will need to work a bit harder than usual. Take advantage of the quiet times and use them to give everyone the rest and recreation needed to help them perform at their best.

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Prioritise

On many days you will not achieve everything you have set out to do! Interruptions happen and there are always tasks that take longer than estimated. Make sure that you know what the most important jobs are to tackle first. Get the big ones out of the way. There will be more satisfaction and more peace of mind working in this way. Some jobs will not wait until tomorrow or next week, so do them first and attend to the smaller priorities later as they can be deferred if necessary.

Communicate – we are all different!

Talk to each other – your partner, boss, or employee. If you're feeling a bit stressed tell someone and share the load. We are all individuals. Each of us has a different ability to cope. Some people enjoy working from daylight to dark while others cannot cope in that way. It is amazing how by sharing ideas you may come up with some very simple solutions. Remember that there is not always a right or wrong way to get things done and each must find a way that is comfortable and successful for them.

Be flexible and adaptable

Don't be frightened to change if you can see a better way. Is there some technology or idea that will make your life simpler and easier? Weigh up the costs and benefits before you decide, but think about this for longer than it takes to write out a cheque or swipe a credit card. Talk to someone who has tried it or done it and make the decision from a position of knowledge. Knowledge is power – power that you will use to make your farm work for you.

Don't be intimidated!

Don't ever decide not to take a course of action because "the neighbours will think you are mad"! Once a day milking is a classic example of this. It used to be only the lazy, useless buggers that would milk cows once a day and some people probably still think that way. Louis and I are working on a part-year once a day milking system from around December/January. We are attempting to put some numbers around the idea over a three-year timeframe. Since we made the decision, we have had many people approach us to find out more information, but what has really surprised us is the number of people who had done this in the past, in some cases for many years, and had never been comfortable to speak about what they were doing because it wasn't the thing to do. We have more hours in a day now to achieve the rest of our plans and are working on refining the system to get the timing of the changeover from twice-a-day to once-a-day right.

Are you the only one who can do it?

Are you indispensable? Are you indestructible? Would the place fall apart in your absence? Then you are definitely *working for the farm*? What would happen if you had an accident tomorrow which meant you couldn't perform your duties? Or worse still, what if you died in that accident? Would you be leaving the legacy you hoped for? *Your farm must continue to work for you when you are not there or you are not in control.* Get things in order at your place and show the farm who is boss?

When was the last time you had a holiday?

You can't work *in* your business day in and day out without taking time out to see the big picture. No one is effective going full throttle all the time no matter how much they enjoy what they do. Sometimes the best time to take time out is when you think you possibly haven't got the time. You will be sure to see things in a different light when you return. I'm not advocating walking out in the middle of calving without the right staffing or relief staff in place as you probably won't want to come back and see the results!

We are not robots. We must see light at the end of the tunnel to keep our enjoyment.

The other advantage of having a break is that we see things from a fresh perspective; we widen our horizons and if the time-out is spent attending a conference such as SIDE we learn new things that will help us be better in business when we return.

Remember the stage of your career and work out how much you are prepared to spend on a holiday without putting your plans at risk, but always have a holiday.

Spending time with your family

While it can be a disadvantage of farming to live on the job, you can turn it around to find new and wonderful ways to spend family time. What about a picnic by the river if you have one? When our children were young, we used to pitch the tent on the back lawn in the summer. This took us away from the phone, TV and all the usual daily humdrum to playing games and reading books together. Now that our kids are older, the only one that will camp on the lawn with us is the cat. The humans are happier with the car and the petrol cards - another example of how life has phases and how you will change according to your circumstances. Quality time with family is not based on how much you spend, it is about how much you care for each other and communicate with your loved ones.

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Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy!

Learn to love your cows! If this is too much for some of you Kiwi Blokes, then at least learn to like them. Cows can be a tremendous source of fun with all their personalities – although some seem sent to test you! Cows, like people, will only show you the respect that you first show to them – the choice is yours.

Appreciate the sunny days, even in a drought there are things to be grateful for. The dollars may be less but the evenings are perfect for a long romantic walk.

And on a bad day?

Not every day goes perfectly. You will experience bad weather and you will get cows with milk fever or calving trouble. This is the time when you remember the big picture, the plan. Each day you are working toward a bigger plan. Think about how staying in control will get you to where you ultimately want to be. Stick to your commitment. Don't believe that the grass is *always* greener on the other side of the fence, because every career or pathway has some negative aspects to it. You will not get the good or appreciate it as much without some effort along the way.

Commitment

Stay committed to your plan. I like the advertisement for a battery that asks, "Don't you ever give up?" If your vision and plan to achieve it are really important to you then be determined to achieve it! While sometimes the timelines aren't perfect in the plan, be flexible enough to re-work the plan but keep the vision strong.

Stay in charge of your plan and don't let others try to stray you away from it. Things will be sent to test you from time to time but losing your focus takes away your feeling of control. There is a saying that the world stands aside for one who knows where he/she is going. If your vision is strong then others will help you realise it!

Don't save all your dreams for retirement

If all your dreams are way out in the future you will start to lose faith in your ability because they seem to be always just dreams and never achievable. Make sure that you have daily, weekly, monthly, yearly and longer-term goals. A few quick wins will give you the confidence to keep setting more goals and make you an expert in achievement, encouraging you to set bigger and brighter goals. You must also be flexible as not all goals go exactly to plan or time and may need sensible readjustment but the important thing is to remember to stay committed and never give up. It is extremely important that you set goals that you believe you can achieve, otherwise you will feel daunted from the beginning at trying to achieve something that is not realistic.

Do not save all your dreams for retirement as none of us can guarantee we will get there or that our physical ability will be good when we do. You must enjoy life along the way. Once you have established your base business, start realising some of your retirement dreams – this will make you more productive as you are not hanging out for something that you can only do in ten or twenty years. You will be making a start!

Keep learning

We are all growing and learning every day. I have learned many things as I have tried new experiences and will continue to do so for many years yet. We start off as ‘cows and grass’ people and then we move to managing people and larger business and our skills need to change with progress. We will make mistakes along the way and those are the biggest learning lessons of all. A lack of understanding can make you feel really out of control so endeavour to understand each and every situation you encounter.

Summary

- If you are working toward your first farm or building your base business, you will need to work a little harder, spend less on yourself and make a few more sacrifices along the way, but you will have success in the long term.
- Make sure you have business and financial plans which map out where you want to go and put you in control of your own destiny. Pay yourself first.
- Design a system that works for you and your staff and allows sustainable working hours and time out. Prioritise to do the important things first.
- Be flexible and adaptable. Do not be intimidated and certainly do not ever feel that you are indispensable. Communicate – we are all different!
- Make sure you have a holiday but ensure that it fits with your financial plan. Time with the family does not need to be expensive.
- Stay committed, keep learning and do not save all your dreams for retirement.

Being in charge is all about being in control and having choices. Do you have a plan or do things just happen to you? Be committed. Take control now and show your farm who is the boss! Enjoy!

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