

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Chris Withy

The following paper on leadership is based on my own experiences and thoughts as a dairy farmer employing staff for the last five years. Information presented is also based on research completed by Human Synergistics NZ Ltd and discussions with Simon Culhane (Rugby Southland), John Hay (Southern Wide Real Estate) and other dairy farmers.

Introduction

Over the past 15 years there has been significant change within the dairy industry. From mergers, to declining supplier numbers, the industry has evolved into what we see today. Cow numbers have grown approximately 72% in the last 15 years with average herd size (South Island) now being 470.

The basic farming principles of “cows and grass” still hold true today as they did 15 to 20 years ago. However, for many farmers today, there is the added challenge of organizing staff as well as cows.

I believe the challenge for us as employers is to put ourselves under the microscope – stop blaming the so called “bad labour pool” for much of the on-farm stress and look at ourselves. Are we armed with the appropriate skills to give our staff a fair chance, to develop positively as people and become the next generation of farmers? If we become effective leaders our employees will enhance our business, not detract from it. We operate million dollar businesses, but this means little if we don’t have the right people managing them. Is this where the 4% lift in productivity, that the industry is after, lies.

The success of your business is reliant on producing milk efficiently, as well as on your ability to lead a team of people (employees).

It is paramount for us to realize this fact, embrace it, and equip ourselves with the right skills to ensure we still have a successful business in 10 years time.

One of the aims of this paper is to acknowledge and embrace the attributes and skills required to become a good leader. If we don’t do this we may fall on a double edged sword through negative experiences i.e.

- Employee leaves the industry due to negative experiences with an employer
- Employer leaves the industry due to negative experiences with an employee

Due to these people leaving feeling disheartened, the industry loses good people as well as credibility as an attractive industry to be involved in. We need to appreciate that being a good employer or leader is now an essential part of dairy farming that needs to be developed and learnt. It is a part of dairy farming, that if done well will see positive outcomes, not only

in the milk vat, but also in attracting good staff in the future, and ensuring our health and sanity remain intact.

What follows are viewpoints of the role, styles and characteristics of effective leadership.

Role of a Leader

The ideal leader has a balanced concern for people and tasks. This person is focused on:

- personal development of his/her team, both as a group and as individuals
- achieving defined goals and tasks

It is important for the leader to be focused on both areas, not just the second. To create the right culture/environment for the team the focus has to be on people and tasks. To be purely task orientated will have negative outcomes for your team and business.

Leaders will use different styles of leadership to achieve, as can be seen from the diagram below.

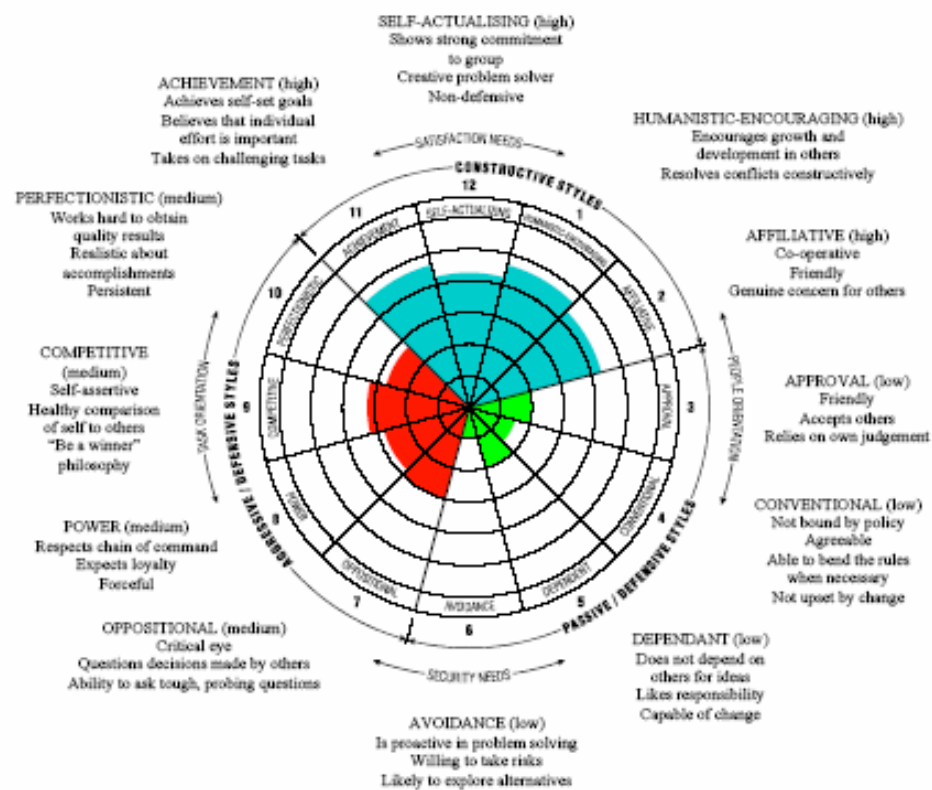


Figure 1: Human Synergetics Ideal Leadership Circumplex

This diagram is based on research by J Clayton Lafferty Ph.D. and Robert A Cooke Ph.D. as presented by Human Synergistics Inc.

It shows three styles of leadership and their associated characteristics. The shaded areas show how high or low these characteristics are rated when trying to achieve effective leadership. It shows that an effective leader will generally be strong in the constructive styles but also possess a moderate degree of the aggressive/defensive styles of leadership. The passive/defensive styles are shown to be less effective.

Leadership styles

Constructive styles

These styles focus on people orientation, in combination with achievement. They balance people and task considerations in order to attain excellence. There is a positive regard for what others can achieve and recognition of the value of positive feedback. These styles see leaders gain satisfaction through seeing others fulfill their potential by providing support and inspiring self-improvement. Not only do they build personal effectiveness but also a strong sense of self-esteem. The overall approach of these styles of leadership is to actively involve team members in planning, goal-setting and decision making where appropriate.

To develop this style of leadership, it is necessary to take time with people and develop a genuine interest in them. Find out what makes them tick, listen attentively, ask questions, and accept them for who they are. Be open about your thoughts and feelings, and this will encourage a reciprocal response.

Aggressive/Defensive styles

This type of leader feels the need to control rather than co-operate. He/she will enforce standards and exert their authority. They try to motivate through coercion and punishment. This style will initially get a lot done but it is at the expense of team members' confidence and will not be very sustainable.

Characteristics of effective leadership

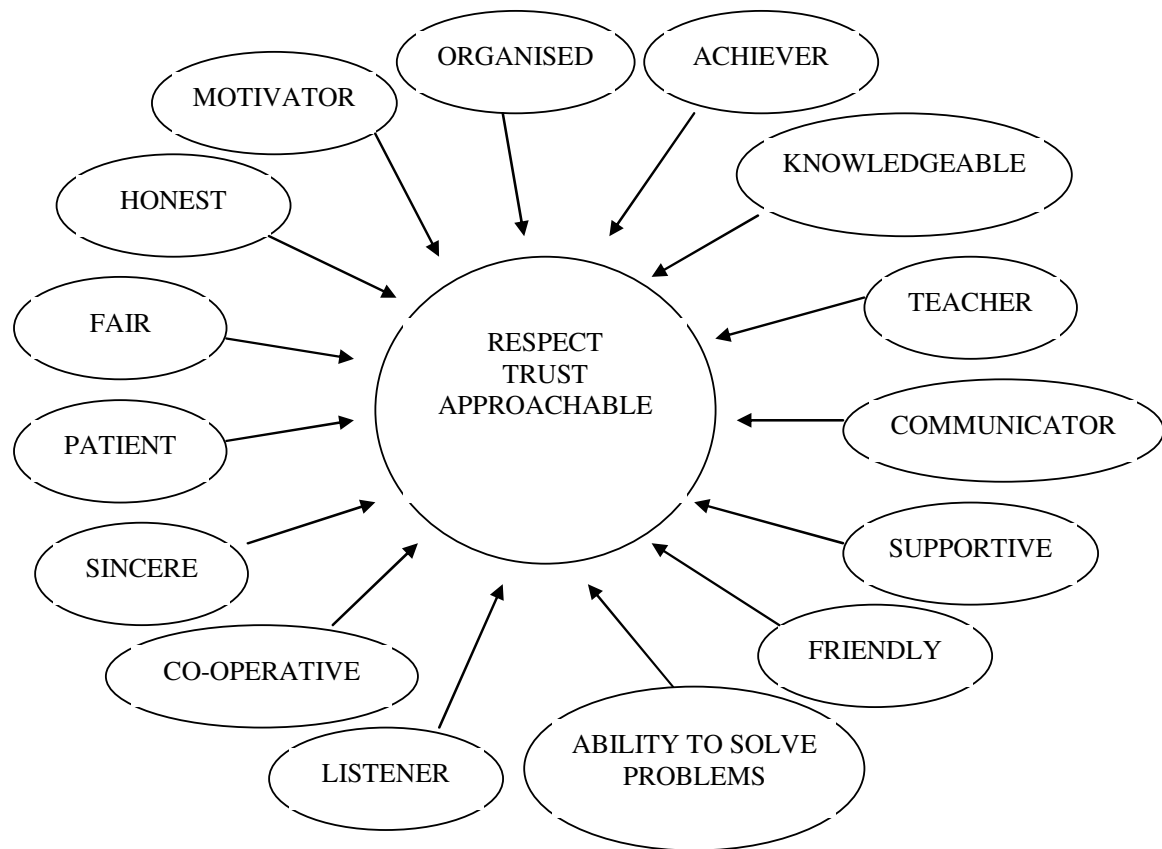


Figure 2: Characteristics of effective leadership

The relationship that is formed between employer and employee will determine the type of culture/environment within your business. As can be seen above, there are a lot of characteristics that a leader requires in order to gain respect, form trust and be approachable. If desired, these skills can be learnt.

The first step is to understand what skills are required and then to identify within yourself areas of weakness and areas of strength. Areas of weakness must be acknowledged and action plans put in place as to how to overcome these weaknesses. These areas may be difficult to identify – we probably all know people who are “good guys”, however, when it comes to being an employer, people sometimes struggle. Why is this? If these people wish to change and have their businesses running on a more positive note, they need to ask themselves some hard questions, and get some feedback from people close to them. Ask your partner how they would rank you in each area in a normal situation and then when tired and stressed. Try and decide what style of leadership you are predominately using.

The following are a few areas that I believe are critical to the success of being an effective leader:

- Communicator – this is a two way thing. It’s one thing to give someone information, but it’s another thing to know whether that information is actually understood. Feedback is vital in effective communication. You will need to know the best way to convey information to different people and encourage feedback to ensure it has been understood. People absorb information differently – visual, auditory or hands-on
- Also, people like to be kept in the picture about what is happening and sometimes it is the small things that you may not have informed them of that upsets them. This and a general openness in communication with staff will encourage a reciprocal response
- Supportive – staff need to know that you are battling for them as much as they are for you. Ask staff what they want from you and the job, what their aspirations are, what is important to them, and develop a genuine interest in each individual. Understanding members of staff is important.
- Achiever – there are goals and objectives to achieve. Hard decisions may have to be made; there is no time for procrastination. Do it. Effective leaders have a spirit of achievement that is evident to staff, they do things wholeheartedly which then becomes contagious to others. Staff members are expected to think for themselves and be problem-focused rather than concerned with blame or avoidance of failure. A leader’s focus should be on success and positive feedback, and encouraging staff to respond to challenges
- Teacher – training is vital for personal development. Understand the different ways people learn. Don’t overload them with too much information at once and showing staff once how to do a task isn’t always sufficient. It takes 21 days of repetition for a habit to form. It is also important to identify strengths and weaknesses in individuals, work with them on these and take them into consideration when planning work, especially during spring. Dan Carter is a great first five but makes a lousy hooker, so why do we expect our staff to be a “jack of all trades”?
- Knowledgeable – to be an effective leader you have to be good at your particular trade. Learn it well. Being good at something breeds confidence, which every leader needs and helps gain your staff’s respect
- Organized – by planning well, efficiencies of systems and people will increase. People will enjoy working in this environment where generally there is minimal chaos
- Listener. Listen and take on board what staff have to say. If they have a valid point acknowledge it; if not justify why you differ in your opinion

- Consistent/Fair/Patient. You commonly hear these three characteristics when staff are asked their expectation of an employer. They are also three characteristics I believe are affected when employers are tired or stressed. Put action plans into place to avoid this. Being more organized with staff and managing time is a great start. Recognize when your patience is wearing thin and count to 10
- People are creatures of habit, therefore, don't keep moving the goal posts. Be consistent when dealing with issues
 - Golden rules that I try to adhere to are:
- Set direction (goals/targets), expectations, standards and code of conduct early. Staff should be involved here
- Avoid emotional confrontation
- Don't let emotion cloud disciplinary issues. Justify decisions and ask for feedback
- Resolve issues sooner rather than later
- Before making judgment, collect all the facts (the other side of the story)
- Solve issues constructively
- Hold regular meetings and appraisals
- Have an open door policy. It is important that if there are issues you are the first to know, not the last
- Mistakes are tolerated, negligence is not
- Assume nothing

Summary

I believe that if we, as employers, want to demonstrate better leadership, there are several areas we need to focus on:

- Ensure that we have a balanced concern for people and tasks. Some quotes I have heard that sum this point up well are:
- Better people make better players. (Simon Culhane – Rugby Southland)
- To be successful you have to make those around you successful.(Lee Astridge – People Solutions Inc)
- Join our team and you will be a better person in a years time. (John Hay – Southern Wide Real Estate)

To have philosophies such as these must be a step in the right direction for your business, staff and the industry. I believe that having this type of focus will help to obtain the right balance of leadership styles and associated characteristics.

It is important to identify leadership characteristics that you need to develop, allowing better leadership. They say you can't change a leopard's spots but with a conscious effort, I think you can.

An employer's most important job is to build relationships based on trust and respect. When you achieve this and with the right management systems, you will be rewarded for all the time and energy you put into your staff.

Systems must be in place to allow your leadership to be effective in the most trying situation, and remember your staff get tired and stressed also.

Take Home Points

- Acknowledge what is required for effective leadership and embrace it.
- To the next generation of farmers, don't be in too much of a hurry to climb the ladder. Build a strong foundation of knowledge and skills (not just cows and grass), as those 400 – 2000 cow sharemilking jobs can be more about managing people.

For our well being and that of the industry, we as employers need to become better leaders.