

# Farm Employers Learn How To Attract, Keep Workers

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INTERCOURSE (Lancaster Co.) — An almost ideal classroom setting would include a respected, charismatic teacher with a solid grasp of the subject, and a class of several eager, willing students.

While that may be the epitome and the rare reality for those within the traditional educational system, it is not the norm for the many seminars coordinated and offered to those in agriculture.

Normal agricultural seminars are a series of speakers with handouts and slide shows or overhead projector transparencies.

However, on Wednesday, Dr. Bernie Erven, professor and Extension specialist in labor management at Ohio State University, used about every classroom teaching trick in the book and a few others to evoke participation in discussions, and to pass along techniques and tools for hiring farm labor.

Erven, who grew up on an Ohio farm, has degrees from Ohio State and University of Wisconsin and just recently returned from a year at Cornell University, N.Y., where he worked with several national leaders in farm and personnel management.

Twenty-one people attended the Intercourse \$30-per-person, \$50-per-couple event, held at Harvest Drive Restaurant, on Wednesday. A repeat of the class was held Thursday at the Allentown Days Inn.

The seminars were sponsored by the Penn State University Extension offices of Chester and Northampton counties, and included a noon meal. The seminar went from 9 a.m. to a little past 4 p.m.

Specifically, Erven covered finding, recruiting, training and keeping farm employees.

While he followed a certain format, the professor said that he tries to stay flexible in his presentations to the needs of the group. He said the dialogue and participation was above his expectations.

The program was the first one of its kind offered by extension in the area, and will likely return, according to Alan Strock, multi-county extension agent. However, Strock said that the program will likely be picked up under the Dairy MAP program, which is a coming series of intensive educational offerings designed to aid successful operation of a dairy farm.

According to Erven, management is nothing more than the art of creative problem solving.

In order to be a better and more efficient manager, it helps to be exposed to a number of different tools used successfully by others according to certain scenarios.

The key of the information offered from Erven seemed to be that a personal desire for honesty and a constant re-evaluation of perspective, facts and priorities, can help establish a working environment desirable and mutually beneficial to the employer and employee.

The lessons offered by Erven were numerous. Those who participated said they felt the seminar was worth the cost.

His teaching technique seemed to be to hint at the what he was trying to convey, through partial, sensationalized statements, or through anecdote and actual or reported occurrences.

The participants then offered summaries of what he was saying.

He would stay on a topic until it was clear that the concept was grasped and that the "students" had vocalized an understanding of the material.

The group was set up in a semi-circle around Erven, who manned his overhead projector and frequently used a portable blackboard, but spent most of the time traveling the room, maintaining eye and verbal contact, offering participants equal access to himself.

He also relied on humor to create a sense of ease.

Among some of his offerings, he warned the group about seeking identical-quality people for all jobs on the farm. The point was to build a force with multiple talents, viewpoints, and personal goals.

The reason was so that the work force not only gets along better because worker infighting from direct competition is lessened, but because of the greater depth of experience and skills which can be brought to use.

"Every dairy farm should have somebody who doesn't like cows," he said.

He said that the employer has to be honest with self-analysis and figure out who they are and what they want out of life and their business, before starting to decide what they want others to do.

He told the group they must "Know yourself. Know your farm. Know your strengths and weaknesses."

One of the class participation activities included breaking the group into four groups — two groups were to write down the advantages of working at a farm, the other two groups were to list the disadvantages.

After a 10-minute period, the group got back together and, using a blackboard and chalk, Erven wrote down the reasons.

He and the participants reviewed each of the reasons listed.

For each advantage, they talked about validity of them as selling points for a job. For each disadvantage, they talked about ways to minimize the disadvantage or eliminate it.

On the list of advantages were working with living things; diversity of job; outdoor working; flexibility in hours; job satisfaction in creating a needed product; no traffic problems to get to work; work with family; and recreational perks, such as hunting and fishing.

The disadvantages were working in miserable weather; long hours and low pay; dangerous; no vacations; little chance of advancement; fewer benefits than non-farm jobs; the work is never finished; jobs are undefined; and their is low prestige.

Of course, other considerations for both points of view were given, but Erven limited the issues to those which could be listed and dealt with in a reasonable time.

The conclusion reached was that there are "Some very important pluses in farm work," Erven said.

The disadvantages, he said, could be addressed through management — creative problem solving.

For miserable weather, the solutions provided by Erven and the group was to provide adequate protective clothing for workers, which would include rain gear, boots, etc., and to also consider modifying equipment to provide for worker comfort.

Erven said that many studies and farmer seminars deal with ani-

mal comforts and improving their environmental working conditions to get more efficient results.

He said that same concern should also be addressed toward the worker.

The issue of long hours and low pay is one by which the farm employer knows he is getting free work beyond a reasonable number of hours.

According to Erven, a study showed that farmworkers working beyond 40 hours a week were being paid \$1.60 for each additional hour.

At 60 to 80 hours per week, a worker will get tired. Tired people make mistakes and take shortcuts. Erven said that employers have to look at the potential losses which can be felt to a business when asking workers to put in long hours for low pay.

On the other hand, Erven told the group, "Good labor management is not an excuse for poor business management." His point being that there is a lot of work to be done in setting up an organized, functional farming operation, and labor management is but one consideration.

Erven said that the reasons given most often by an employer for an employee leaving a job is compensation. However, Erven said that employees reveal that compensation is far down the list in what keeps them on a job.

While not suggesting that pay is unimportant, Erven said it's not everything — employers have to realize they can and do offer more than compensation for work performed.

"Employers tend to overestimate pay and underestimate job satisfaction."

He also told the group they must treat their workers as individuals, as people. He said there is no formula for success in establishing a good relationship.

He said that rewards and incentives — expected or unexpected — should be in place for good performance. He said that if a worker is doing a good job, instead of giving that worker money (depending on the worker), there are other creative ways to reward that person that shows that you understand what that person likes. It does two things; it helps create a loyalty and it doesn't have to be as expensive, or more expensive than a cash bonus.

Another guideline Erven offered is that small businesses should be regularly losing their best employees and their worst employees.

Although purposefully losing a good worker may not seem like a good move, it is important to recognize when a worker is overqualified or has worked up to a position where there is no longer any room for advancement.

Erven said in these cases, it may be best to talk to the worker, suggest trying to help him secure a better job, tell him that the business can't afford to pay him what he is worth.

The key to it is, the farm gets the benefit of having a good worker who is moving up. If the employer tried to keep a good worker without eventually recognizing an inability to compensate that worker for skills developed, etc., that farm may never see another informed good worker again, because eventually the reputation will get out that there is a poor employer running things.

Getting rid of the worst workers is also a necessity, but how the

employer handles the dismissal of that worker is also very important. Erven suggested taking the tact that it's obvious the job isn't suited for him, and to try to leave the former worker with opinion that he left a place that was good for the right person.

Erven said the goal would be for the former worker to tell his friends, "It wasn't for me, but you'd probably do pretty well."

As far as the safety aspect, that also can be minimized through education, adopting a safety attitude, and through regular maintenance of equipment and maintaining safety features.

The undefined job is really the failure of the employer to properly analyze himself, his farm and weaknesses and strengths.

Erven said, "I know. You hired the man to do the milking and anything else you want him to do, when you want him to do, and at anytime. That's why he gets use of the house."

The participants' laughter at Erven's sarcasm, however didn't last as he addressed the low prestige associated with some farm work, and went back to address the lack of farm job definitions.

For low prestige, there are many things which can be done to improve that. Mostly, however, is the attitude of the employer. If he does not consider it to be a prestigious job, the worker won't either.

Moreover, community interaction goes a long way to establishing prestige.

He said that a survey done among the American people of what they thought was the most prestigious job in U.S. society showed the most common answer was supreme court justice.

## PSU Dairy Club Contest

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Nearly 200 young people participated in Penn State's Spring Dairy Cattle Judging Contest last weekend, including 120 in the 4-H division, 51 in FFA, and 25 in collegiate intramural competition.

The winning senior 4-H team from Susquehanna County consisted of Josh Harvatine, David Harvatine, Steven Pavelski, and Andrea Garner. Susquehanna was also high team for reasons. Placing second overall was a team from Blair County including Joe Stitt, Rebecca Kelly, J.D. Kelly, and Kristi Morrow. Lycoming, Lawrence, and Wayne Counties placed third through fifth, respectively.

The high individual in senior 4-H competition was Donald Harwood of Franklin County, followed by Josh Harvatine, Susquehanna; David Fava, Washington; Maggie Whiting, Lawrence; and Zack Bryant, Wayne. In oral reason competition, David Fava ranked first, followed by Matthew Day of Cumberland County and Jessica Dean of Lawrence County.

The Armstrong County team brought back the highest honors in the junior 4-H division in dairy. Team members included Leland Claypool, Roy Claypool, Travis Walker, and Todd Walker. Wayne County's Jessica Chyle, Jarrod Burleigh, Alan Woodmansee, and Shelly Woodmansee placed second. Lawrence, Lycoming, and Susquehanna Counties were third through fifth.

Jessica Whiting of Lawrence County was high junior 4-H individual. Matt Pease, Susquehanna, placed second, and Roy Claypool

Erven then discussed all the negatives associated with being a supreme court justice.

"For every single job, you can make an impressive list (for disadvantages)," he said.

Once all the job descriptions are done — "Be specific. Milking is not a job description; it's the name of some work." — the best way to proceed is to try to create as large a pool of applicants for the job as is possible.

Erven said that he presents this formula: get the largest number of applicants (Don't make the applications too specific or irrelevant. He said he likes one-page applications which give the basics — name, education and experience.); select from the applicants those who should be interviewed; do the interviews and make a selection.

While he offered some insight into each aspect of the hiring formula, he did say that the best way to build up a good pool of applicants is to advertise. He said the best way to do that is to use want ad sections of newspapers.

Using word of mouth advertising for a job, or relying on close references, limits the number of applicants and puts the farm employer at a loss of control in getting the best workers he can.

He also suggested training someone with desire but little experience, as opposed to someone with lots of experience, but also attitude.

Although there was much more offered during the seminar, Erven said that it was key that the participants changed their operations slowly. He suggested five years.

of Armstrong and Jessica Chyle of Wayne County tied for third. Leland Claypool placed fifth. For reasons, Adam Dean and Jessica Whiting of Lawrence County tied for first, followed by Jeremy Stackhouse of Lycoming.

Tulpehocken walked away with the senior FFA contest. Team members Andy Bicksler, Jennifer Grimes, and Melissa Bicksler placed first, third, and fifth individually. Tulpehocken also was high team for reasons, with Andy Bicksler high reason individual. Placing second overall was a team from West Perry, followed by Central Cove. Meranda Dum was second high individual overall and for reasons. Katie Biddle of State College was fourth high overall.

In junior FFA competition, the winning team was from Centre County. Members were Kenny Brown, Brandy Semestrote, Ryan Connelly, and Trish Watson. Teams from Oxford and Sugar Valley placed second and third. The top five individuals were Brandy Semestrote; Doug Harbach, Sugar Valley; Ryan Connelly; Mike Benfer, Central Cove; and Jill Booth of Oxford. In reasons, Jess Lawrence of Lawrence County, followed by Brandy Semestrote.

In collegiate intramural competition, high overall individual was Thad Sturgeon, followed by Todd Biddle, Andy Foster, Kathy Pavelski, and Dwight Stoltzfus. In oral reasons, Biddle placed first. Stoltzfus, Sturgeon, and Andrew Morley followed in second through fifth.

The contest was sponsored by the Penn State Dairy Science Club.