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What Are Good Labor Relations?

Robert E. Perry, District Extension Economist

Good labor relations is the factor most often identified as necessary for successful employment by farm employees. Farmers who employ hired labor also rate "good labor relations" as an important factor, though many rate good wages as more important (*Table I*).

Table I. Relative Importance of Employment Factors

	New York ¹		Indiana ²
	Farmers	Hired Men	Farmers
Good Labor Relations	3	1	1
Good Wages	1	2	2
Adequate Housing	2	3	3
Good Buildings & Equipment	4	4	4
Vacation	5	6	5
Incentive	6	5	6
Bonus	7	7	7

¹A. E. Exc 49. "Incentive Payment Plans for Hired Men," W. Harry Schaffer, George L. Crossler, Robert S. Smith, Cornell.
²EC-306, "Keeping Good Hired Farm Labor," Paul R. Robbins, Purdue.

What are "good labor relations"? From answers received from employees, they appear to involve a mixture of human characteristics and open communications that build mutual respect and loyalty. The following are each a part of good labor relations and are presented as being expressed by the employee.

- **Attitude:** A cooperative, friendly attitude is evidence that the employer is interested in the hired man and in his success. It shows the employee that the employer is a person he can get along with. He's more apt to ask questions before he acts on his own if the boss's attitude encourages it.
- **Expectations:** Knowing what jobs he is to do and what he is not to do is important to the hired man. Let him know what is expected. If jobs are to be done in a certain way or at a certain time, communicate that also. In some cases, it may be helpful to explain "why" the specifics of what is

to be done are important. It's better to over communicate expectations than to assume he knows.

- **Supervision:** Supervision needs to be tailored to the man. During the early stages of the relations, it is advisable to visit with the employee about how much supervision he wants or needs. As he is able to assume more responsibility, direct supervision can be reduced.
- **Evaluation of Performance:** A rating of the hired man's performance on a regular basis is a good communication tool. A rating form listing the factors on which he is being evaluated lets him know how he is being evaluated. Factors might include such items as timeliness, avoids waste, safety, job skill, care of equipment, willingness, honesty, pride, use of time, reliability, or other factors pertinent to his job. Probably no more than three ratings are needed, e.g. excellent, okay, unsatisfactory.

The rating should be done on a regular basis, such as quarterly or semi-annually and reviewed with the employee. The review with the employee should be candid and stress his performance rather than his personal characteristics. You may want to keep notes showing date, job and the "excellent" and "unsatisfactory" performances as a basis for your rating and review. If a written agreement is used, it may also need to be reviewed on a six-month basis.

- **Planning:** Planning ahead reduces hasty decisions and confusion. Schedules for the hired man let him govern himself within limits. Listing jobs to be done next week or next month lets him know what to expect.
- **Patience** is usually appreciated. It takes a new hired man some time to adjust to a new situation.
- **Recognition:** When the man has done a good job, let him know. Expressing gratitude or giving sincere praise may be as important as more pay.
- **Community:** Helping the employee and his family become a part of the community through church, 4-H club, school, etc. helps them find security.
- **Title:** The title a person carries tells him and others what you think of him. When introducing or addressing the hired man, he will probably appreciate a title that refers to his main job responsibility. "Irrigation Engineer," "Shop Superintendent" or "Herd Foreman" are more descriptive and command more respect than "hired man."
- **Confidence:** As an employee shows capability in a certain area and your confidence in him increases, begin asking his opinion and advice. Make him part of the team.
- **Timeliness:** Being on time with wages, incentive payments, promised vacation time, or promised housing improvements lets him know you are a man of your word.
- **Sharing:** Don't give the hired man all the "dirty" jobs and make him feel like that is all he was hired for. Show a willingness to share the unpleasant duties.

These are some of the tangible and intangible things that have been identified as contributing to good labor relations.

Although housing and other prerequisites are usually considered a part of wages or in addition to wages, communicating the cost of these items to you or the value of them to the employee is also part of good

labor relations.

Although labor relations is not as true to the principle of "like begetting like" as biological reproduction, it is still a principle. The items listed are some of the seeds for good labor relations. If they don't abort, get hailed out or wormy, they should bear fruit.

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