

# **DAIRYING AS A PROFESSION OF FIRST CHOICE, NOT A JOB OF LAST RESORT: THE DIXON STORY**

**Neil and Rebecca Dixon**

**Dairy farmers, Bookaar, south west Victoria**

## **Take home messages**

- **Neil & Rebecca place a high priority on managing staff well, which includes treating staff like they would want to be treated themselves**
- **The Dixon's try to provide continual challenges and opportunities for staff to develop their skills and learn more**
- **A policy and procedures manual developed by the Dixon's for their employees has proved a valuable management tool**

## **Background**

Neil started out working on his parent's dairy farm in Terang. When they bought a second property at Bookaar, Neil began managing this with Rebecca. This property has now been in Neil and Rebecca's name since 2003. Eighteen months ago the Dixon's decided to buy the neighbour's property and with 21 days notice they doubled their land area and also doubled their herd size. This has created new challenges on the farm and has meant that a lot more time needs to be devoted to management, including managing staff.

## **Farm details**

**Farm size:** 297ha

**Cow numbers:** 550 milking cows

**Production:** 455kg MS/cow/yr (6500 Lt/cow/yr)

**Supplements:** 1.5-2.0 t grain

**Dairy:** 32 stand rotary

**Young stock:** Reared away from the home farm

**Staff involved:** 3 Full time, 2 Casuals

## **Business goals**

- To maintain a minimum of 10% return on capital per year
- To achieve InCalf targets within 3 years
- To achieve autonomy of operation in 5 years
- To develop and maintain involvement in industry groups
- To create a policy & procedures manual for every operation conducted in the enterprise within 5 years
- To provide a minimum of 8 hours professional development and training opportunities for each staff member per year.

## **Induction**

When new staff start work at the Dixon's property, they are provided with an 'Employment Kit'. This kit contains forms for super, tax & bank details and emergency contacts. It also contains a farm contact list, farm map and a current Policy and Procedures manual.

This Policy and Procedures manual has been a valuable tool for the Dixon's. Often new staff coming onto the farm can be faced with 'information overload' as they

adjust to how the farm operates. Even just walking into a new dairy for the first milking can be a sea of switches, taps, etc. The Dixon's decided to create a manual that outlined how things worked on their farm and that can be given to new employees before they start. This allows employees to have some idea of how the farm operates before they begin and gives them something to refer back to as they learn along the way.

The manual is also useful for employees who have been on the job for a while as they can refer back to it to double check things and it also holds employees more accountable because the Dixon's can refer back to the way things were set out in the manual.

The idea for the manual came from talking to friends in other industries who employ people. For example, the supermarket in town or the herd improvement centre had operating procedures, so why shouldn't they on their dairy farm? The Dixon's realise that they have to compete with the jobs offered in town to get staff so they need to be as professional.

New staff also receive a property tour, introduction to other staff and are rostered on for milking with the Manager for the first two weeks. A verbal discussion and review is completed at the end of four weeks.

### **Organisation, efficiency and motivation**

The Dixon's hold fortnightly meetings with all staff on the farm. Attendance by all staff is required and contribution is strongly encouraged in all areas. These meetings allow everyone to keep up-to-date with what is happening on the farm and to be involved with some of the decision making. The job list and schedule is reviewed and current farm data such as herd test results, milk quality, agronomy or industry publication are discussed. Staff members report on their key areas of responsibility. This is also a chance for staff achievements to be recognised and for improvements or areas of concern to be raised by staff. These meetings show that the Dixon's value their employees and their opinions and the staff value being involved with the real 'hub' of the farm.

The Milking Roster (monthly) and straight shifts are designed to allow staff flexibility, to nominate days off, to provide a balanced workload and provide planning opportunities. A yearly planner is on display & reviewed regularly.

Staff are provided with amenities including fridge, lunch area, individual secured lockers, tea, coffee, soft drinks, etc. These are designed to provide comfort and familiarity for staff and efficient time utilisation.

Annual staff appraisals & performance reviews are conducted and staff are involved in conducting an annual SWOT analysis of the business (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

Regular social functions are held which provide enormous potential for team building, recognises & supports the importance of families of staff members and allows interaction in a more relaxed environment.

### **Compliance practises**

Validation layers are in place for routine tasks. For example, sign-offs for milk/hot water temperature, vacuum pump oil levels, vehicle maintenance and veterinary attendance records.

Neil believes that when things go wrong it's important to not fly off the handle. Generally an employee will feel disappointed enough themselves without the boss making them feel worse. Often too, incidents are not completely the employee's fault and it is important to stop and look at what could have been done differently to avoid it from happening.

Private discussion are carried out with individuals regarding conduct that conflicts with policies/procedures, expectations, previous discussions and core business values. Any actions that breach policies and procedures are documented and retained on file.

### **Rewards and recognition**

Staff are presented with various monogrammed shirts, caps, etc for actions which demonstrate outstanding commitment, dedication or contribution to core business values or goals. This is a very effective team development tool, providing a sense of belonging and helping to create pride in their job.

The Dixon's work hard to move forward in their business and they like to give their staff opportunities to move forward as well. Neil will try to take staff with him to discussion groups or courses so they can talk with and learn from the people that Neil learns from.

Staff who show skills, interest or potential in an area of the operation may have the opportunity to take on responsibility for that area (if available). This helps to create ownership, creates continual challenges & potential for individual improvement and reduces management time which can be invested in alternate areas, eg business development, HR, hands on support for individual improvement, etc.

Various remuneration options are offered to staff including vehicles, phones, etc and pay rises.

### **Final Word**

Neil & Rebecca believe that it is important to respect your employees and to treat them like you would like to be treated yourself. They wouldn't ask their staff to do jobs that they themselves wouldn't do.



Neil & Rebecca Dixon (at left)  
and farm employees in their  
dairy