

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

Steve Ralston  
Sharefarmer, Kerang

## Take home messages

- A good boss is someone who doesn't expect employees to do something they themselves wouldn't do
- Employees, particularly younger ones, need to see a future or a pathway for themselves on the farm
- We need to promote the many positives of dairy farming rather than letting people focus on the negatives

## Background

Steve's parents bought a dairy farm when he was around 14 years old. While Steve was in Year 11, his father became ill and Steve left school to work on the family farm. After his father recovered there wasn't room for Steve on the farm so he began working for their neighbour as a casual employee.

Six years later and Steve is still working on that neighbour's property. He undertook an apprenticeship, winning the VFF's Apprentice of the Year competition in 2004, before taking on a share-farming position on the property. This was a bit of a shock to the system for Steve at first, having to take on the decision making and responsibility for the farm and the extra jobs, such as irrigation. The current share-farming arrangement is 10% of milk payments and no costs. Steve has been share-farming now for 2 ½ years.

## Farm details

**Farm size:** 200ha

**Cow numbers:** 230 milking cows

**Supplements:** 1.8 t grain

**Pasture/crop types:** 40 ha perennial pasture, 160 ha annual pasture (predominantly shaftal clover and annual ryegrass)

**Dairy:** 14 a-side double up

**Young stock:** Generally reared on the home farm.

**Labour force:** Steve is the primary labour unit. The farm owner provides about 2/3 of a labour unit during the week.

## Communication

For Steve, communication on the farm is relatively simple as there are basically only two people involved with the business, himself and the farm owner. Before Steve took on the sharefarming role, he and his boss would have a chat in the morning about what had to be done and then go from there, though more often than not there was a lot of two-person jobs that they worked together on. Talking about what jobs had to be done helped Steve prioritise what was important.

Although there is no formal structure to their communication, Steve stresses that communication is a vital part of being able to work well with others on a farm and good communication has been one of the keys to his success on the farm.

### **Decision making**

Steve has been involved in the decision making on the farm for a while, probably after the first year of the apprenticeship. It has been a handy learning curve for him, as in the end he was virtually weaned into the sharefarming position. This helped him not to get too overwhelmed by the responsibility and workload.

### **Training**

Taking on the share-farming role has meant that Steve has done less training in the past two years. Previously, as well as completing his apprenticeship, Steve has participated in the CowTime program, attended the Target 10 nutrition course and participated in a pasture course. He plans to complete more courses in the future as time permits.

### **Motivation and rewards**

Steve believes that it is important for young people to be able to see a future for themselves on a farm, whether it is to move towards share-farming or farm ownership or just developing their skills and learning. In Steve's situation the owner's sons were not interested in the farm so Steve could see an opening for himself there. That provided him with real motivation to work hard and gave him something to aim towards.

Seeing improvements all the time, and knowing that his input into the farm counts also motivates Steve, which comes naturally when you are enjoying your job.

When it comes to rewards on the farm, the industry-based awards (such as VFF Apprentice of the Year or the Genetics Australia Sharefarmer of the Year) provide some motivation for Steve but the main incentives so far have been advancement on the farm and starting sharefarming. Financially the incentive is now there for him as, being on shares, the better the cows do, the better he does.

### **Employers**

In Steve's opinion, a good boss is someone who doesn't ask their employees to do things that they themselves wouldn't do. Good bosses don't have unrealistic expectations of their staff and aren't 'slave drivers'. Steve believes that happy employees will generally be good employees.

Steve says that dairy farming is hard work and long hours and if you tried to get an employee from a manufacturing section of the workforce to work the hours that dairy staff work, then their union would have a fit! He doesn't believe that it's wrong to get people to work those hours, or that there's another way, but when it comes to taking on an apprentice or a new employee, it would pay to talk to them more about how they're coping.

Young apprentices are also quite often put on while they are 16 years old and asked to work weekends, to the demise of their social life - while they are still in their formative years. Steve feels that if we want a reliable and sustainable dairy workforce then these are some things we could look at.

### **Attracting more people to the dairy industry**

This is the “million dollar question”. Steve believes that the industry does have an image problem with images of pulling cows in the rain and mud or focussing on the long hours that may be required. There is not enough focus on the positives of dairy farming, the good days that you have, the things that work well. People tend to remember the negatives. It is also important to provide jobs that are financially rewarding and provide a career path for employees.

### **The future**

The future for Steve at the moment could take a number of different directions. At the moment he is considering buying his parent’s property in the next couple of years.