

Coaching for achievement in agriculture

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Abstract. This paper details the leadership skill of coaching and the impact that it is having on farmers and their businesses. The impact was identified by interviewing farmers who are using coaching as part of their leadership skill-set. From four events held around New Zealand the lessons learnt from coaching in the agricultural sector are: always start with the vision of what is to be achieved, keep an open mind to the ideas and options of others, and focus on identifying and then developing strengths as this is where significant gains in effectiveness come from. These farmers identified that using a coach approach was benefitting their business and themselves in areas such as: increased staff engagement, development of thinking, growth in the uptake of new skills and the implementation of them on farm. It is recommended that farmers are made aware of the benefits of coaching and are assisted to work out where to go to learn the skills of coaching.

Keywords: Performance, success, growth, development, succession, mentoring.

Introduction

Through all the change that is occurring in agriculture - scale, automation, technical efficiencies, governance, out sourcing, intergenerational pressures - there remains one constant, the need for human interaction. How we communicate, verbally and non-verbally sets the foundation for a beneficial relationship. The new leaders moving into management, control and to ownership can be thinking differently to the majority of incumbents who control rural businesses. Ignoring this diversity of thinking may deprive the business of the benefits from new ideas and fresh perspectives. There are examples of casualties within family operations and employer-employee relationships that show the perils of holding an 'I know best' belief.

As a leadership literacy, coaching is becoming more prevalent in the agricultural industry. Typically, it is being utilised by businesses who believe that developing their people is highly correlated to sustainable business performance. Coaching is a chosen event, just like the continual choice is, of whether to be reactive or proactive. Developing someone's ability to think is an outcome of coaching. A leader's shift in thinking from 'solving staff's problems' to 'developing staff's thinking' taps into their potential to problem solve. Without having the choice of working it out for themselves, staff will default to the 'norm' behaviour that is imposed by habit, by others and by the environment they live and work in. Leaders using coaching focus actions on how to shift from where one is at now to where one wants to be. It is future orientated - a positive and exciting place to hang out.

Coaching leads to action. Skills to achieve this include: Listening for the essence of what is and is not being said, Questioning to discover new pathways and solutions; and The sharing of wisdom wisely through feedback and providing perspective. Anchored to a coaching model these 'soft' skills produce 'hard' results. Coaching is a way of thinking and a set of skills that bridges the gap between work relationships, family members, generations, styles, preferences, beliefs, genders and cultures. It is non-judgemental. It helps people understand (what leadership is about) and helps them accept that they need to change. Coaching focuses on enabling the coachee to work out how to get from where they are now (a problem, issue or opportunity) to where they want to be. To an employee in the agricultural industry this coach approach deals head on with their needs to be part of the solution, to know how they are going and to know how their effort counts towards their growth and the performance of the business. The coach benefits as well - capacity and capability is built from empowering others to take ownership for how to achieve what is required. Done consistently well, coaching creates time for management to direct their energy into other areas of priority e.g. from doing the work, to developing the vision and direction.

Method

To identify the impact from adopting a coach approach, in 2011 Coach Approach Ltd held four events around the country - Hinds, Invercargill, Hamilton and Matamata. Farmers were invited along to hear a panel of peers who had been utilising coaching in their business. The format of the events was similar, the outcomes were consistent. Details of the Hinds event are covered in this paper. Sixty farmers attended this event. The panel consisted of three farmers of diverse ages and coaching experience

Results

The Audience was asked the question, ‘In growing and developing your people and team, where are you now and where would you like to be?’. The answers highlighted a gap between the two points (Table 1). Specifically, there was the desire to shift from working to effect a foundation for development to having an environment that fosters a motivating, aligned and achieving team.

Table 1. Audience perceptions

Where are you at NOW	Where would you LIKE TO BE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to what comes along • Building a team environment and culture • Clarity of communication • Clarity of focus re targets • Creating an awareness • Disappointment with some staff • Frustration • Misalignment of values • Staff turning over 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving results • Engagement, being employer of choice • Happy to come to work each day • Have a clear understanding of where ‘they’ want to be • Have progression pathways • More time off / time out • Motivating and empowering them • Stress free • Strong, trusting relationships • Sustainable team, no one is indispensable

The farmer panel was then asked the question ‘From using the coaching skills within your conversations, what benefits have there been?’. Key benefits identified were those of developing staff’s ability to solve problems, management being able to step back from some parts of the day to day operation, staff taking on responsibility, more effective conversations and stronger staff and family relationships (Table 2). The farmers also noted that the benefits were interdependent.

Table 2. Benefits

Benefits to the farm business	Benefits to ‘me’ personally
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching through planning the season makes the season easier • Conflict and feedback becomes easier to handle • Empowers staff to take ownership • Farm running better with not always leading from the front • Frees up more time to do the stuff need to – priorities • Happier work environment • Reduces/decreases staff turnover • Ripple down effect when questions are posed from staff – they start to answer their own questions • Stronger relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become a ‘lazy’ manager, not doing all the work • Don’t need to know the answers • Find are building better relationships • Increased confidence • No longer spending major part of day solving problems • Now coaching people to develop the skills they need to do the work • Others are taking more responsibility now, meaning more time for me • Realise the extent of good staff/people surrounding me • Refrain from automatically ‘telling’ • Stronger family unity and happiness

The audience also brainstormed the consequences from not growing and developing their people and team (Table 3). Their responses were clear – a deterioration in the quality of the working environment, break down in relationships, staff choosing to leave and poor performance.

Coaching has enabled these farmers, through growing and developing their team, to unlock benefits at both the business performance level and at the personal level. Two other case studies were discussed at the events. These highlighted the return on investment from coaching. Olivero et al. (1997) conducted a study on ‘Executive coaching as a transfer of training tool: effects on productivity in a public agency’. Thirty-one managers of a public sector municipal agency underwent a conventional managerial training program, followed by 8 weeks of one-on-one executive coaching. After training alone, the average increase in productivity was 22.4%. When training was augmented by coaching, the average increase in productivity was 88%. Richardson AW (2011) details the process and outcomes of coaching being introduced in 2005 to TINE Group, Norway’s largest dairy cooperative. In one plant short time sick leave reduced

by 45%. On this one measure alone there are significant cost savings. Progress was also recorded in the annual employee satisfaction surveys.

Table 3. Consequences

Consequences from not growing and developing	
• Accidents	• High staff turnover
• Bored, complacent	• Lack of growth
• Brand/credibility/vision erosion	• Nil or little succession
• Divorce	• Not valued → staff leave
• Enjoyment and satisfaction lacking	• Poor performance
• Have to do the work yourself	• Stress

Critical lessons

Start with clarifying the vision

Whether dealing with a challenge, an issue or an opportunity, being clear on what outcome is required provides the 'coordinates', the rationale, for then developing an effective action plan.

Have an open mind to the ideas of others

Dropping the 'I know best' belief opens the scope for engaging others and discovering better and different ways for achievement. An 'egoless' leader can readily shift from solving others' problems to developing others' thinking, unleashing their potential and creating sustainable capability, capacity and succession.

Identify and develop strengths

Enabling team members to focus on what they are good at provides them with the opportunity to excel. This fosters a collaborative team culture – as each member is reliant on the strengths of others to work in their lesser strength areas.

What does coaching offer agricultural extension?

Coaching is another skill that rural professionals can utilise alongside their skills of managing, teaching, training, advising, consulting and mentoring. The benefits include:

- Because coaching does not require the coach to know the answers, the coach is freed up to focus on leading the conversation that empowers others to come up with the solution.
- In a group facilitation, the coach approach involves and engages the group, they come up with and own the outcomes and the actions to get there. This relieves implied pressure on the facilitator to need to have all the answers.
- With the group or coachee owning the desired outcomes and the actions, they can more readily be held accountable in time and task to what they have committed to do.
- Coaching develops thinking beyond current awareness. More effective thinking brings in wider perspectives and insights that can create better and more sustainable solutions.

The leadership literacy of coaching is an opportunity for all agricultural extension leaders to embrace. Through people and teams, it can deliver transformative change. What is the choice that you will make regarding coaching?

References

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