

## Personnel Management in Practice

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### INTRODUCTION

While much research has been undertaken on the technical aspects of plant propagation, little has been recorded about the equally important aspects of personnel management. Following a study trip to the West Coast of North America to look specifically at personnel management in propagation, an attempt was made to redress this imbalance by reporting my findings to the I.P.P.S.

Using the information and experience gained from my travels in the U.S.A. and from studying and observing personnel management techniques in the U.K., I will endeavor to explain what the benefits can be to staff, management, and the business. Putting personnel management techniques into practice is a challenge. This paper provides an account of how I have applied my findings while employed as a manager in the U.K.

### MANAGEMENT STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Observations from my travels to the U.S.A. revealed two main management structures. Although the tiered management structure was in operation in the majority of the 15 nurseries visited, I found it was changing gradually to a flatter management system with fewer top level managers, but more middle managers and supervisors.

In my experience, putting the flatter management structure into practice has been successful providing one can recruit the right people who are suited to the job and to that style of management. Staff at all levels need to be keen and interested, reasonably assertive, good communicators, and be able to supervise and train others. The flatter structure is, in my opinion also a more humanistic structure in practice, because staff are involved at all levels and enjoy being on a more equal footing.

From experience I have found that changing suddenly or too dramatically from a more traditional management structure can have a negative effect. Any change over should be slow, gradual, and well communicated; otherwise you can find yourself in a situation of reduced staff morale, communication break down, and reduced commitment and interest among staff. Make sure you also allow plenty of opportunity for staff feedback about such changes.

### RECRUITMENT

Generally speaking, in the U.S.A., staff are recruited by the manager. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find good staff both in the U.K. and in the U.S.A. Nurseries along the West Coast of the U.S.A. are increasingly dependant on Hispanic people to make up the main compliment of the work force. These nurseries recruit from advertisements in local newspapers, referrals recommending relatives or friends looking for work, and recruitment agencies.

In practice I found the second option to be the most successful of the three mentioned. Existing staff don't tend to recommend people unless they are confident that they will be able to perform well, otherwise they will feel responsible if it does not work out.

**Recruitment Days.** A system I would strongly recommend, based on my own experience, would be to hold recruitment days for specific vacancies. One U.K. nursery, Webbs of Wychbold, found these to be its most successful means of recruiting staff and recommended this system to me. In practice, I have found that staff of good calibre can be recruited when you advertise the position locally, open it up to all age groups, offer flexibility of work hours, and describe clearly what the work entails. It is also important to involve and delegate tasks to all key staff in the weeks leading up to and on the recruitment day.

When using recruitment days I have found that the majority of people who apply do tend to want to do nursery work and some of them have nursery experience. Offering flexibility of work hours means more interested people can apply and candidates can be given the opportunity to try out the tasks in various departments.

In my experience, seasonal staff recruited on recruitment day tend to stay longer, are more reliable, and are happy to return each year, while involvement of existing key staff in the recruitment process, perhaps even giving them the final decision on who they recruit, makes the choice a team effort.

There are some disadvantages when using this recruitment method. For example, the initial setup and organization prior to and on the day is labour intensive and time consuming. New staff may be required for different departments on various recruitment start dates over a period of several weeks. If you hold your recruitment day too early, successful applicants for the later start dates may have found employment elsewhere by the time you want them to start.

## **TRAINING AND INDUCTION**

It is commonly said that staff are the greatest expense in a business but it must be remembered that they are also its greatest asset. Without staff that have been trained to do the job, productivity and quality both suffer. Frequently, there are too few skilled or supervisory level employees to teach and train unskilled staff, so the emphasis should be on teaching unskilled staff the basic skills to do the job. When equipped with the necessary skills they in turn can contribute to the training of new recruits.

The "buddy system" is used to good effect in nurseries I have visited in the U.S.A. It involves pairing an established worker with a new employee. Existing staff working to good standards of safety, quality, productivity, tidiness of work, and individual and team development can train new recruits.

In practice, the training needs of all staff from management to general workers should be taken into account and acted upon. At review time, staff should be encouraged and assisted to evaluate their own learning and development needs and to contribute to planning their future training.

Training for staff can be in the form of specific work activities, formal training either externally or internally, or formal education to achieve qualifications.

**The Importance of Induction.** Induction is very important, as it is the first real training that new recruits gain on nurseries. I put into practice an induction check list so new recruits are informed about all the relevant details relating to rules, guidelines, and orientation. Employee handbooks are also a very good idea both for helping new recruits become more familiar with the organization and as a reminder for existing staff. These are commonplace on nurseries in the U.S.A. It is important to ensure that such handbooks are regularly updated to remain effective.



## ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW

On larger nurseries in the U.S.A. all staff, from managers to general workers, are assessed on an annual basis. Most use the so-called judgmental appraisal system for assessment. This takes into account the assessment of behavioral attributes as well as evidence of performance. This method of appraisal is traditionally carried out by the employee's immediate line manager, the most commonly used appraisal factors being job knowledge or abilities, quality and consistency of work, productivity, interaction with other staff, attendance, and time keeping.

In my experience I have found the self-appraisal system to be less confrontational than the above. In practice I encourage staff to carry out SWOTS (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) on themselves and I also carried out SWOTS on them. We then meet individually to compare the analyses. This way staff become less stressed and see the process as being more constructive. It is a good way of identifying weaknesses and putting the necessary training in place to improve overall performance.

Part of the review process should be to reward good performance. This can take a number of forms: pay increase, opportunity for promotion, profit share, performance measured bonus, acknowledgment of achievements, support for personal development training.

In my experience, when you put time and investment into good people and they feel supported, appreciated, and fulfilled in their job, they are more inclined to stay. As a manager I do not want to lose my most valuable assets.

## COMMUNICATION

Good communication is a vital element in managing staff effectively. It is particularly important to communicate positively or you will "kill the spirit" — the ownership people feel about their work. If you have a problem, something negative to say, turn it into something positive, by coming up with a solution, or a suggestion for one. I have learned a great deal about positive communication from my contacts in the U.S.A., most of which I have been able to put into practice.

We all seek respect, staff just as much as managers, and if managers don't respect their staff they should not expect their staff to respect them. Don't rush to blame staff for things that go wrong, this is negative communication and it affects confidence and morale, which in turn affects targets and quality. Instead try to involve staff at all levels about decisions that affect them or the organisation as a whole. Practice an open door policy and let staff know that you are available to them should the need arise.

## MOTIVATION

One of my main reasons for travelling to the U.S.A. was to try to find out how managers motivate their staff and, very importantly, what motivates the managers. The most important reply was, "I love my job, working with plants, and working with colleagues who feel the same way." Managers in horticulture certainly do need to be highly motivated, love what they are doing, and be happy in their work environment.

Motivating staff can be one of the most difficult parts of a manager's job. One common reason for lack of motivation is lack of confidence. Certain staff come across as being awkward and difficult, yet often it is because they are unsure about what

is required of them. I have found that informal training sessions help and as confidence grows and staff are more comfortable in their surroundings, they become better motivated.

Money, of course, must not be forgotten as a motivating factor. However, it is by no means the main one. It is always nice to receive a pay increase but job satisfaction goes along way towards creating fulfillment. Most skilled propagators and managers are happy to be paid a fair wage for their skills, knowledge, and experience. Introducing a profit sharing scheme can have a very positive effect not only as a motivation factor but also to give staff a stronger sense of belonging and instill greater commitment. They can "own" a part of the business and it places the importance of the success of the business partly in their hands.

## **CONCLUSION**

Effective communication between management and staff is the key to successful personnel management. Show sensitivity to the needs of staff. If staff know that you are there, not only to manage but also to support them, they in turn and for the most part, can be relied upon to support you. If mutual respect can be established between staff and management the benefits to the business are likely to be significant.

Much of what has been said about personnel management is simple common sense. We can all be guilty of breaching one or more of the basic rules. To avoid this, I believe regular self-assessment is critical to success.