

Top-to-toe check on what really counts



Tony and Sarah Watson – ‘indicators’ tell the story.

South Island-based corporate dairy enterprise Dairy Holdings (DHL) has put its people management under the microscope to see if it measures up to international best practice.

Chief executive Colin Glass said the entire company from its head office through to all 71 of its farms were being assessed under the international Investors in People standard.

“We know there’s a very strong link between people management and how well our farms perform,” he said. “We’ve found that the people who pay attention to how they manage their employees, the people who are good communicators, also run the farms that really fire.”

Through the process the company aimed to independently verify that its employment practices were top rate and find out where improvements were necessary.

The internationally accepted standard would become a signal to prospective staff that DHL and its farms were employers of choice and employees could expect to be treated well.

DHL had previously undertaken Quality Farm Employers of New Zealand (QFENZ) assessments, but when that ended last year, Glass said, the company recognised that it was important to carry on with outside assessment of employment and business practices.

“We’ve done it despite the current economic environment because we don’t think human resources (HR) is an area where you can afford take short cuts,” he said. “People are a fundamental part of our business – even more fundamental than dairy cows are to our operation.”

together with an initial group of 36 farms.

Investors in People New Zealand managing director Stuart Burgess explained that the assessment is also a performance tool, reviewing how well the company’s overall business strategy is understood and communicated across all staff in the enterprise, starting from the top. It evaluates how successful the business is at developing and supporting its people from the top down. The head office and 22 of the 36 farms met the standard on first assessment.

Tony and Sarah Watson of PeopleMAD are accredited Investors in People agribusiness assessors.

While Tony assessed DHL’s head office, both carried out the on-farm evaluations, meeting farm managers and sharemilkers as well as talking with their staff.

Focus on outcomes

“Rather than ticking off that managers have the right pieces of paper in place and that they’ve simply met the requirements by having documents like job descriptions, we focus on outcomes and talk through how managers communicate with and manage their people,” Tony said.

Twelve “indicators” or topics are assessed under the four broad categories of farm planning, training and development, managing people and compliance. The farm planning category, for instance, checks to ensure the farm has a clear set of objectives and targets and a plan for how they will be achieved. It also looks to see that all team members have had a chance to contribute to the development of the plan. It checks to ensure there is a culture where people are encouraged to share ideas through regular meetings or briefings and that managers can give examples of how they encouraged people to take

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Head office too

DHL’s head office, including Glass, went through the assessment process this year

ownership and responsibility for decisions.

For each category, there is an element of planning, doing and reviewing. Feedback is provided on the positive aspects of the managers' practices as well as indicating areas for development if standards haven't been met, Sarah said.

"Even if they have met the standard for a particular area in their people management, we talk through practical ways they can improve further"

The feedback is detailed in a written report that the farm managers or sharemilkers receive along with their supervisors. At the back of the report, an action plan lists the suggested improvements with space provided for the manager to write in exactly what will be carried out, who will action it and by when.

Scott Searle manages the 315ha, 1000-cow Selwyn Farm for DHL. This is the 29-year-old's third season managing the property which last year produced 1100kg milksolids (MS)/ha using just 90kg dry matter (DM)/cow of baleage. He's very clear that the priority target for the farm is profit and is involved in setting the budget with his supervisor Gary McGregor.

He has five staff, two having been with him since he started as manager and the others in their second season. Four are from overseas – his second in command Gabriel Ifodi is Romanian, while husband and wife Umesh and Meena Kumari are Fijian, as is Ram Nair. Dairy assistant Wendy Monk is a Kiwi.

Scott's dairy experience includes a year running a small property in Ireland and all of his employers, both in New Zealand and overseas have been "great people to work for". He feels strongly that as a boss it's important to treat people as he would like to be treated himself and is big on saying please and thank you.

Four categories

Scott said the Investors in People process had been enjoyable, more like a discussion than ticking off paperwork. Sarah had



The Selwyn Farm team from left, Wendy Monk, Scott Searle, Umesh Kumari, Ram Nair, Meena Kumari and Gabriel Ifodi.

talked through each of the four categories, discussing how he involved the staff, communication of the farm's objectives and his daily

days through DHL," he said.

He also encourages staff who are capable in a particular area to share their knowledge with others.

Staff rate themselves on a numbered system at their annual performance review and then Scott rates them as well.

requirements as well as how he carried out performance appraisals and how he sets individual targets for staff. Compliance issues such as effluent management and health and safety are also reviewed.

Staff rate themselves on a numbered system at their annual performance review and then Scott rates them as well.

"It's good to see how they rate themselves and areas where they think they might need more training or help. Agriculture ITO is really pushed and we have training

"Wendy is good with animal health and things like mastitis," he said.

"She takes action when she sees something and she's taught the other guys a lot. Our somatic cell count [SCC] is kept down under 150,000."

Feedback from Scott's staff show he's not a shouter, that he's well organised and clearly articulates the outcomes he's expecting, although he doesn't give each staff member a list of jobs to do each day.

"They know the things we have to get done and I don't have to timetable their tasks out for them," he said.

Scott believes it's best to pick your battles and accept that not everything's going to be done exactly the way he'd do it on a big operation like Selwyn Farm.

"Everyone has their own way of doing things and as long as we end up with the outcomes I want, then that's all good."

As well as assessing Scott's people management skills, Sarah also checks out how Scott is feeling about his situation as an employee of DHL. She gets feedback on how Scott interacts with his supervisor and ensures the lines of communications are working well in both directions within the organisation.

"It's been a great process and I've taken some good things out of it about involving people in planning and following up training so staff get the most out of it," he said.

"It was good to know we achieved the standard, but it was also good to get the feedback on how we could improve further."