

# **SUCCESSING WITH MIGRANT STAFF – GETTING THE BEST PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR FILIPINO WORKERS**

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## **Introduction**

Filipinos comprise the biggest group of migrant workers in the dairy industry today. Their contribution to the New Zealand dairy industry is significant and undeniable. Most dairy farm owners are happy with their migrant staff but complain that they have difficulty in communicating and motivating them to perform better. This is largely because of the mistaken notion that Filipinos can be managed the same way as Kiwi staff. Understanding the cultural traits and characteristics of Filipinos give employers an insight into how they think and behave. Being aware of Filipino mentality can help employers decide which management approach to use to get the best performance from their Filipino workers.

## **Your typical Filipino migrant worker**

Most New Zealanders do not appreciate the obstacles a Filipino worker has to overcome in order to come and work here. The typical Filipino dairy farm worker arrived here via a recruitment agency. Most if not all of them would have been from the countryside, have had secondary and perhaps some tertiary education, knows English but may not be conversant and have little or no dairy farming skills. A portion of migrant workers arriving in New Zealand these days have come from dairy farming jobs in the U.S., Europe or the Middle East. But even then grass based dairy farming as it is done in New Zealand is unique in the world and whatever experience acquired elsewhere would be incompatible with dairy practices here. Immigration New Zealand requires, among other things, a minimum of two years dairy farming experience. It's a chicken and egg situation. How can the worker qualify if he does not have New Zealand dairying experience and how will he be capable of Kiwi dairy farming practices if he has not worked here. I have spoken to a Filipino who worked in the biggest dairy farm in Saudi Arabia. He is a vet and has spent years inseminating cows in the breeding department. Naturally he was overwhelmed when he started work here and his employer was a bit annoyed expecting someone with a broader skill base. On the bright side Filipinos are quick learners and given the right environment will excel in their job in a short period.

Most if not all Filipinos arriving to work here would have paid hefty sums in recruitment fees. Majority would have pawned their home, properties and belongings to do so. Some workers spend as much as \$15,000 in recruitment fees, medical examinations, plane fare and other requirements to get here. The daily minimum wage of a Filipino agricultural worker is \$13.80 less than what we make

working an hour in New Zealand. The only way he can come up with \$15,000 is to approach a loan shark who charges exorbitant interest rates. Combine this with the fact that they have limited dairying skills when they arrive and you will have a worker who is nervous and timid. His main concern is giving a good impression fearing that if he disappoints his employer he might be deported. This is the mindset of a Filipino that turns up for work on his first day at your dairy farm. Imagine the psychological burden of having this huge debt to pay, a family back home that needs support, not having the necessary skill set and a boss who speaks English that he could hardly understand.

## The Philippines

What most Kiwis do not know is that the Philippines is a country composed of 7107 islands. Due of this geographical situation the Philippines is made up of many regional tribal groups with varying cultures and languages. There are about 176 dialects in the country. If you travel to the Visayas which is the middle group of islands I would have to speak to the locals in English to ask for directions. English is spoken virtually everywhere in the Philippines. Having been under American rule for over 30 years, our educational system is American language based and most of our textbooks are in English. Being conversant in English is probably the single most important reason why there are more than 11 million OFWs or Overseas Filipino Workers abroad.

Due to this cultural diversity, it is hard to describe a typical Filipino but there are certain character traits that we share as a nation. The Filipino core values influence how they behave in any situation. **The Philippines is recognized to have a collectivist culture indicated by close family and community ties in society. Filipino values are focused at preserving social harmony, motivated mainly by the desire to be accepted within a group.** This makes a Filipino a reliable person that can easily integrate and work with anyone, anytime, anyhow and anywhere.

## Filipino cultural traits and characteristics

1. **Filipinos are religious.** Their strong faith in God helps them overcome the trials and tribulations of working abroad in some of the toughest working conditions. You will see Filipinos working under the desert heat of the Middle East and in freezing wind on Salmon processing ships in Alaska. They will look out and see a silver lining in every bad situation. This is what drives them

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on as they face the challenges of their work. How is this relevant? Hard work does not bother a Filipino. It is how they are treated that affects them.

2. **Filipinos are respectful** and very conscious of age, seniority and position. In our society, we automatically give deference to people who are older than us. In Filipino families there are specific terms of reference for each sibling from the eldest to the youngest. Often Filipinos will address an older Filipino as “kuya” which means older brother or “lakay” or “manong” depending on which region they come from which is a term of respect for an older and wiser person. When a group of Filipinos come together as a work team they would informally “rank” themselves according to age and seniority. Filipino workers who just arrived here find it difficult to call their employers by their first name as they are uncomfortable to be called by their first name by a worker who is clearly younger and or less experienced than them. The Philippines is so huge that life in the cities is not the same as life in the countryside. You will need to understand local customs. Looking a woman in the eyes in the rural villages is rude. It's like undressing her. And, if you're talking to a Filipino, or giving them instructions, they might not establish eye contact for the same reason. Filipinos do not like swearing and are generally uncomfortable around people who do. You do not summon a Filipino with your fingers. It is insulting to us.
3. **Filipinos have close family ties.** Filipinos find it hard to be away from their families but they realize that the only way to get ahead is to work abroad. So they leave to find better earning opportunities in the hope that someday they would have made enough to come back for good. The typical Filipino will save as much of his earnings to start a small business at home, be an entrepreneur and eventually stop working overseas. However, free housing accommodation and primary education in New Zealand have encouraged some to bring their families over. Kiwi farmers have long since recognized this and would encourage their worker to bring their families over. Workers who have their families here tend to stay with their employers for a long time. Some even sacrifice progression if they are treated well by their employer.
4. **Filipinos are resourceful and creative.** During the times when we don't have the means to accomplish something, we find ingenious ways of using what we have to solve our problems. It might help to have an open mind when working with Filipinos as they might have their own approach to doing a job. They will work with what they have but will give better results if provided with the right tools or equipment for the job. Generally Filipinos will take care of tools and equipment assigned to them.
5. **Filipinos are adaptable.** In many foreign cities including New Zealand, you have Asian restaurants or neighborhoods that are uniquely Chinese or Vietnamese. But the Filipinos adapt, and embrace their new culture quite differently. Often in places you will find Chinatown or Little Saigon in places like Southern California, USA. You will never find a sign telling you where the Filipinos live. They will generally blend into the community. Most Filipino wives will most like to find work in the local dairy or office and the family will be active in church sponsored

community events. How is this relevant? A Filipino family who has integrated into the community is less likely to leave his employment if he is happy working there.

6. **Filipinos are proud.** Like a two bladed sword this trait has both its positive and negative aspects. A worker who has taken ownership of his job will continue to do it in the highest standard. A committed herd manager will make sure his herd is properly fed and take steps within his control to keep that herd in good condition because this is “his” herd. The negative side to it is that a worker would not readily admit to making a mistake especially when confronted in the presence of his coworkers. He will say yes even if he did not understand the instruction because he does not want to appear stupid and disappoint his employer. He will prefer to ask a coworker to clarify the instruction rather than appear weak in front of his boss. You have to realize that Kiwi English is very different from the American English Filipinos are familiar with and have to explain some of the words you take for granted.
7. **Filipinos love celebrations.** Filipinos might appear quiet and timid at work but they will oftentimes get together with other Filipinos to celebrate birthdays, important occasions and accomplishments. Filipinos love to eat. If you employ a group of Filipinos it is likely that you have been invited to a gathering and have sampled the rich Filipino traditional cuisine. Farmers who have been employing Filipinos for a while will tell you that a crew of Filipinos works better than having just one. Filipinos are heavy on consensus building and will often draw from each other’s strengths and capabilities in a synergistic manner. This is what makes Filipinos awesome as a team. While they might appear to be quiet at work, it’s just their nature to let someone else get the credit.
8. **Filipinos want smooth interpersonal relationships.** Filipinos are big on resolving conflicts. At times they might try going through a third party to resolve it. An uninformed Westerner would assume they’re “talking behind your back” but in truth, if the attempt is sincere, they are seeking a third party mediator to fix the problem. **The Filipino preserves what is a valuable end state of every discussion – harmony.** Generally, the Filipino prefers harmony to logical coherence. In plain English this means that a Filipino will not give you a direct yes or no answer if he is not sure about matter. He might say “ok” which means he is not happy with it but does not want to offend you.

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9. **Filipinos are team players.** Hop into a taxi in the States, the driver will ask, "Where are you going?" In the Philippines, you're asked, "Where are WE going?" Filipinos like structure. They thrive better in an environment where their roles are defined and they know their place in the order of things. They like to cooperate with others in their team to accomplish a common goal. If you have an all Filipino team you will find that after they get into a routine they will actually self-manage. They will organize the daily jobs between themselves with the goal of splitting the work fairly among the team and getting all the jobs done properly in the shortest time possible. Cooperation and working together for a common goal is central to a collectivist society such as the Philippines.

## **Some approaches to managing Filipino staff**

The most important thing to remember about working with Filipino staff is that Filipinos perceive work differently than Kiwis. Kiwis tend to shape their lives around individualism. As children Kiwis are taught to be independent and self-managing. As adults Kiwis are expected to work without close supervision and live in single-family dwellings. While the same can be said about Filipinos. Collectivist culture emphasizes the group's goals over the individual's. Families, communities, political groupings, and even national aims are priorities for most Filipinos, rather than individual success or personal achievement. How does this translate to how you should be managing Filipinos?

If you have a full Filipino team it is easy. Instead of assigning individual jobs to each of them explain to them what jobs need to be done for the day. Usually if there is nothing new going on for the day Filipinos will almost always sort it out themselves. Whoever is perceived to be the leader of the group will usually sort out the distribution of the jobs to each individual. The collective goal is to complete all the jobs to an acceptable standard in the shortest possible time. Everybody does his share of getting all the jobs done. All of the jobs done not all "my" jobs done. If you as the manager or operator provide the right environment for this to happen then it will happen.

If you have a mixed group of workers and some of them are Filipino your goal is to create a team environment and encourage cooperation. While jobs are assigned individually based on skill and experience the aim is to complete the jobs as a team and not as individuals. Make sure no one goes home until all the jobs are done. It is when Filipinos feel that they are accepted as an important part of a team that they shine and perform best.

There are specific tips and management tools that I have found useful:

1. **Take time to know your workers.** Filipinos are generally timid so it's up to the employer to take the initiative to start a conversation with them. As they settle into their work and become more relaxed they will develop the confidence to start communicating with you. This will also give you a chance to find out what skills the worker brings to your work place that might be useful to you. Encourage your workers by focusing on the things that they are doing right rather than criticizing

them for the mistakes they make. Everybody makes stupid mistakes, even you at some time or another, but mistakes are part of learning.

2. **Share your vision.** Taking time to explain to workers how you see your farming business will help them find their place in the order of things and see where they can contribute. Explaining why something needs to be done a certain way is better than showing how something is done. A worker will do a better job if he understands how his actions affect the final outcome. I make it a point to explain to workers the vision of the farm owner for their business and how everything workers do on the farm impacts the bottom line.
3. **Communicate properly with your Filipino staff.** A lot of Kiwis farmers assume that migrant workers are familiar with the words they use on a daily basis. Words that they take for granted like sort, grab, chuck, pop and jab. When I first arrived here I didn't know what a "ute" was. When taking a new Filipino worker on, the first thing you do is to give him a list of words that you regularly use with definitions. When talking to a Filipino worker make him repeat back to you what you just said to confirm that he understood it. If you have more than one instruction for him write it down on the white board so he can come back to it when he needs to. It might me a good idea to have a short coordination meeting in the shed office after morning milking to get your staff organized.
4. **Management by Objective, (MBO)** is a management technique that encourages the workers to work out how he is going to accomplish a job or a series of jobs by understanding the objectives in achieving the results. I found it very useful to encourage dialog with my workers. I make it a point to explain the objective/s of any task to the worker. This method allows the worker to think about what he needs to do to achieve an objective. This allows him to think and plan. The last thing you want is a bunch of mindless robots on your farm waiting for your next order. For example, I would ask a worker what is the objective of milking? He might say, "milking is collecting milk from the cows" and he will be correct. I would then say, "yes this is true, the objective of milking is to harvest all the milk from the cow in a hygienic manner ensuring the health of the cow's udder in the process. Having agreed on this objective the next phase is to discuss all the activities necessary to make this happen. This would start from properly setting up the shed to getting the cows onto the platform to keeping the platform clean during milking to teat

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spraying, so on and so forth. That is when procedures are discussed and agreed upon to complete the job based on the agreed objectives. When this is set everyone in the team is expected to perform the task based on the agreed manner to attain the said objective. I find that subordinates tend to have a higher commitment to objectives they set for themselves than those imposed on them by another person. By helping to establish the desired results I observed that workers are more inclined on achieving established goals. Working hard is a given but I also tell my workers to work smart. This approach will only work if you have a good roster and work routine to go with it.

5. **5 S is a workplace organization method** invented by the Americans but perfected by the Japanese. The main concept is to organize the workplace so that everything that is needed to perform a job is within reach. Everything else not relevant to the activity is stored away. This approach clears away all the clutter that is not necessary to accomplish the job/s at hand. This also means that a location is established for all the tools, equipment and other resources needed to complete the activity. The objective is for everything to have a designated place so everything should be in its place when it is needed. One of the reasons why maintenance jobs are not done on farm is because tools and equipment cannot be found when it is needed. If this happens the job is postponed for another time and most likely forgotten. 5S is a useful tool for organizing your workplace and teaching staff efficiency, discipline and job excellence.
6. **Roster system.** I have developed a roster system where all the routine work is assigned and rotated among the staff including myself. I encourage my workers to think and come to work with a plan. I want them to focus on the job at hand and to see if they can make things easier for the next person doing that job. If they complete all the tasks in an acceptable standard, as long as all the agreed tasks are done, they can go home. Free time is their reward.
7. **Team Work.** Filipinos in particular are very good team players. The key to this is setting up a good roster and work routine. Once your staff starts functioning as a team they will begin to manage themselves. The key is to provide them the information they need to do their jobs. For example, if the manager writes on the board the paddock numbers where the cows are going in the next few days, staff will take initiative in setting break fences ahead if they get some free time. The insecure manager will try and keep the important information to himself so the workers will keep coming back to him for instruction. It's his way of feeling important and in the middle of everything. The problem is when something happens to him or if he is suddenly unavailable then it all falls apart. They say that the best managers are those whose workers do not need them.
8. **Praise and appreciation.** I'm disappointed to say that in the ten years I have worked here I rarely hear employers saying "good job" to their workers. Saying "good job" does not cost anything, it's a confirmation of a task well done and does wonders to boost self- confidence of workers.

“People look to their managers, not just to assign them a task, but to define for them a purpose. And managers must organize workers, not just to maximize efficiency, but to nurture skills, develop talent and inspire results.”

“The Wall Street Journal Guide to Management”, by Alan Murray

## Leadership and management

A lot of people are confused by the meaning of these terms and how it impacts their treatment of their staff. The manager’s job is to plan, organize and coordinate. The leader’s job is to inspire and motivate. The biggest difference between managers and leaders is the way they motivate the people who work or follow them, and this sets the tone for most other aspects of what they do.

Many people, by the way, are both. They have management jobs, but they realize that you cannot buy hearts, especially to follow them down a difficult path, and so act as leaders too.

### ***Managers have subordinates while leaders have followers. What’s the difference?***

**Managers have subordinates** because of authority vested in them by the farm owner. Their subordinates work as they are instructed based on an agreed set of procedures and guidelines in exchange for a salary and other benefits. This is a style known as transactional management. Managers are paid to get things done (they are subordinates too), often within tight constraints of time and money. They thus naturally pass on this work focus to their subordinates. The worker has no choice but to obey because the manager has the power to make his work life easier or harder.

**Leaders have followers. They do not have subordinates** at least not when they are leading. Many organizational leaders do have subordinates, but only because they are also managers. But when they want to lead, they have to give up formal authoritarian control, because to lead is to have followers, and following is always a voluntary activity. Telling people what to do does not inspire them to follow you. You have to appeal to them, showing how following them will lead to non-monetary benefits, what is otherwise known as **transformational benefits**. They must want to follow you enough to stop what they are used to doing and out of faith try something they do not necessarily believe in or is not sure of and situations that they would not normally consider risking.

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On a smaller farm where the owner manages the farm himself, he switches from a leadership role to a manager's role depending on the situation. But on bigger farms where a manager is needed the farm owner/operator should give up formal authoritarian control to the manager and just be there to monitor and support the team. In my career as a dairy farm manager here in New Zealand I have encountered traditional farm owners/operators who could not let go completely and let me manage their farm for them. These has caused confusion on the part of the workers who face conflicting signals from the farm owner and myself. This is one of the primary causes of staff turn-over in New Zealand farms.

The following list show the differences between managers and leaders. This is only an illustration because there is a complex relationship and grey areas between the two. Experienced people who both lead and manage at the same time often display a combination of these behaviours.

The manager administers; the leader innovates.

The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.

The manager maintains; the leader develops.

The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.

The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.

The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.

The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.

The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon.

The manager imitates; the leader originates.

The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.

The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person.

The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

"On Becoming a Leader," Warren Bennis

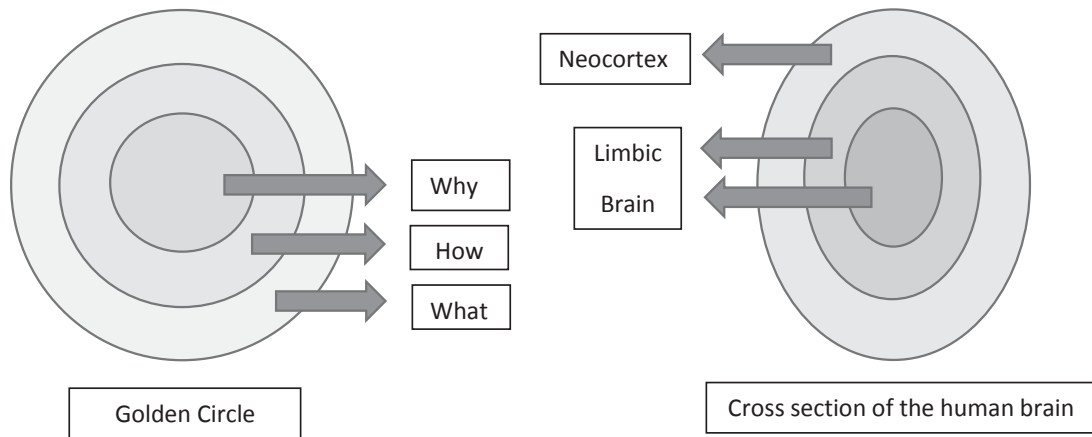
"The task is to lead people. And the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of every individual."

Peter Drucker

## **Have a team, why not create a community?**

I have heard farmers complain time and again about how they have to repeat themselves over and over again to staff about jobs that are not done properly. I believe the problem here is that the worker only sees what's in front of him and not how each job impacts the bigger picture. The dairy industry can be compared to the property market as regards to staff management. Because there are so many jobs and not enough workers, the workers get to pick the jobs and employers tend to scramble for the good workers. It is what is called a buyer's market. In this context, farm owners have to "sell" their vision of their farming business to their staff. I believe they need to make them believe what he believes. How do we do this? We start with the "why."

A cultural anthropologist named Simon Sinek popularized the concept of the “golden circle” and starting with the “why.” He explains that the way people retain information and develop behaviour is actually biological and not psychological in nature. He illustrates this by what he calls the golden circle.



In my experience, farmers tend to focus on the “what and how” parts when instructing their staff to do a job. Perhaps due to time constraints, managers do not bother explaining the reason why a task is done in a certain way. Sinek proposes that when we communicate to our staff this way, from the “outside in,” they do not retain the information. He contends that we should communicate from the inside out or start with the “why”. He explains that if we cut a cross section of our brain and looking from the top, the layers would correspond exactly with the golden circle. The outer layer, neocortex, is the part that is responsible for all our rational and analytical thought and language. The middle two sections represent our limbic brain which is responsible for our feelings like trust and loyalty. It also responsible for all human behaviour, all decision making but it has no capacity for language. In other words, when we communicate from the outside in people can understand vast amounts of information like steps and procedures but it does not drive behaviour. When we communicate from the inside out we talk to the part of the brain that control behaviour and then we allow the person to rationalize it with the tangible things we say or do. When this happens the person

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receiving the information is able to “learn” something from the experience and store it as a memory. The information is therefore retained. Let’s examine a simple example:

The most common task we ask a junior to do is to put up a break fence in a paddock. We start by showing them how to string a reel across the paddock and use the appropriate number of standards to prop the break up. Oftentimes we just say “set up a break fence halfway or three quarters down paddock 1” and that’s it. The worker goes and does it. When we just tell them the “what and the how” but not the “why” they will be able to do the job but they will not retain the information because it does not reach the part of their brain that affects behaviour or commits it to memory. They will be able to put up a fence again but they would have learned anything from the exercise without the “why.” If that fence was further down or closer to the front than you want it would not matter to them because they do not understand the significance of the task. The activity is meaningless and therefore is not committed to memory.

However, if you take a few minutes to explain the reasons behind setting up break fences then the worker will be able to understand the purpose of the activity and rationalize it by the “what and how” part of the instruction. I would, for example, go, “we have 500 cows and we feed them 9kgDM per break. We therefore need 9kgDM multiplied by 500 equals 4500kgDM for this break. This paddock has a 3000kgDM per hectare cover and if we want to leave 1500 as residuals we have 1500kgDM per hectare available. So if we need 4500kgDM for this feed, how many hectares do we need? Three hectares right? Correct! This paddock is 6 hectares and 100 meters wide. This means you have to set up the break half way down to give the herd three hectares. Right? Right!” It may take a while to absorb but the worker will now have a better appreciation of what he is doing. It is not about putting up a temporary break fence anymore, it is about feeding the herd. The worker learned something from this experience and his brains stores that information as a memory. Learning equals memory equals retention.

You will find that if you start with the “why” in all your instructions you will not only be upskilling your workers but they will actually become so good at it that they will need minimal to no supervision. In my farm I have a worker of five months that has gotten so good at residual management that I have left him to decide when to the herd has hit the residuals and shift them into a fresh break. This has relieved me and my 2IC of a job so we can focus on more important things.

When your workers believe what you believe, then you have a community.

### ***Concept of Community***

Why did you come to SIDE this year? SIDE is not just about people coming together to share ideas. As farmers we somehow share the same values and beliefs and that’s why we showed up to forums and farm discussions. We may not personally know each other but we know something about each other and that is we all want to be better farmers. And if we share the same values and beliefs are we not a community? And what is a community? A community is a group of people who share the

same set of values and beliefs. The same principle can be applied to our farming business. If you have a vision of what your farm should be then you should strive to make all the people who work for you see your vision – to make them believe what you believe. You may say this is easier said than done and it is true but you got to start somewhere. Based on my own experience it is possible to make it happen. In the end you will be able to turn some of your workers around for the better. The ones who do not share your values, who do not believe what you believe, will eventually leave and you just have to replace them with like-minded people. Your ultimate goal would be to end up with a team of workers who share your values – who believe what you believe. A team that behaves like a community.

Dairy farming is a business and the goal of business is to create profit. What do we need to generate more profit? Increase production and reduce costs and expenses. The worker has to see that everything he does on farm affects either productivity and costs and expenses. If your worker makes this connection he understands. If you get all your workers thinking this way, they will start to cooperate and self-manage because they will begin to see all the jobs on farm contribute to the general well-being of the business. I always remind my workers that if they take care of the business, the business will take care of them. It's a good mantra to adopt.

## **6 Step Plan to improve performance and job satisfaction**

1. Start with the “why” – make your workers understand why you do things the way you do.
2. Introduce and reinforce managers – give management training.
3. Increase the quantity of power – give more discretionary power to managers. Move the decision making closer to the action.
4. Create a feedback mechanism – staff sees the consequences of their actions. Acknowledge good work, coach to correct a mistake. Saying “good job” is effective and does not cost you anything.
5. Create reciprocity – rotate jobs so that each worker can give feedback to each other's work
6. Reward cooperation, blame those who fail to cooperate
  - a. Recognize good works – promote the notion of teamwork
  - b. If you have to blame, blame people for failing to help or for failing to ask for help.

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## **Final recommendations**

- Review your vision for your business – what is it that you believe?
- Talk to your team – share your vision and start with the “why.”
- Analyse your work routines, rosters and procedures and see where you can make improvements.
- Be consistent and lead by example. If you don't practice what you preach you will create inconsistency and lose respect.
- Learn more about the dynamics of leadership and management. Ask DairyNZ to develop more leadership and management training seminars for dairy farmers.
- If you like what you've learned today, request DairyNZ for more of this material.