

Dairying the Choice Career – the DairyNZ 'People Lift' Project

Terry Parminter¹, John Greer², and Lee Astridge³

1 KapAg Ltd, PO Box 354, Paraparaumu, New Zealand 5254

2 DairyNZ, PO Box 85066, Lincoln University, New Zealand 7647

3 No8HR, 303 Alexandra St, Te Awamutu 3800

Email: terry.parminter@kapag.nz

Abstract. People are interested in becoming part of the New Zealand dairy industry by the opportunities to build their own business, work with livestock and be in the outdoors. Making this vision a reality for people on farms and for new entrants to the industry is a shared responsibility for everybody and particularly for sharemilkers and farm owners. This has required an industry focus on people management, human relations and health and safety. In 2015, a two year establishment project was begun by DairyNZ to build increased capability in work place compliance, team leadership and career development amongst on-farm teams.

The project (called People Lift) involved farm teams from 24 farms as well as certified People Management Consultants and DairyNZ extension staff. The strategic design integrated industry-good with paid consultancy and extension events with one-on-one farmer contact. Farmers and farm staff engaged in a programme of on-farm visits, regional workshops and developing planning tools.

The People Lift programme has been externally evaluated each year using mixed methods combining quantitative questionnaires (e.g. the Gallup survey) and narratives from the Most Significant Change method. Each year's results have been analysed using NVivo® before being reviewed by all the project participants. One participant said, "We are doing the project because we want to make people want to farm. We want this to be their career by choice and not by default ... As an employer, I value their ideas and opinions. It's all about giving them a voice ...". Generally, the responses were positive although one farmer left the programme because they felt "that there had been a lack of progress".

As the establishment phase of the People Lift is completed in 2017, the People Management Consultants are preparing to continue its results with new groups of farmers. Their challenges are to address the wide range of expectations amongst sharemilkers and farmers about the types of skills required for working with people, and how they can make their programmes and planning tools accessible to busy farming teams.

Keywords: (8 points font size, max. 6 words) authors instructions, formatting, structure.

Introduction

The purpose of the DairyNZ People Lift Project is to increase the capabilities of all people working in the industry by creating opportunities for people to develop their careers and enhance the careers of others. The project contributes towards the New Zealand Dairy Industry goals, the DairyNZ goals and the Dairy Industry Primary Growth Partnership with the New Zealand Government.

Methods

Twelve farms in the Waikato and twelve farms in Southland were invited by DairyNZ staff to join a people management project when it started in February 2015. Over the following two years, each farm has had access to a dedicated People Management Consultant to assist them in making changes in personnel management and staff productivity. Workshops for the participating farming teams were also held on specialist topics to support the work of the People Management Consultants.

Each year a project review was held involving the farming teams, People Management Consultants and the Project Advisory Committee.

People Management Consultants

Through the dairy industry's certification scheme, people-management specialist consultants were made available to the farms. The consultants could provide up to eight hours of their time every three months. This included providing advice, coaching and facilitation, in order to assist their clients with learning new capabilities and applying the skills and processes of good people management. The eight hours could be used flexibly as required to provide timely interventions including through: on-farm contact, telephone, on-line contact (emails and skype) and meeting together with other farm teams as a cluster.

The consultants generally began their work on each farm by problem solving to address the existing issues identified by the farmers. The process could involve picking up stress signals such as: long hours, panicking, shouting, turnover and recurring illnesses. Starting with learning how to recognise these signals, the participants moved on to becoming more aware of the need to address the long term needs of staff management and to aspire to become people management 'champions' in the industry. The core services provided by each consultant included:

- Holding a people management stocktake
- Developing a people management plan
- Coaching in new skills
- Reviewing progress against targets

Optional services able to be provided were:

- Planning people power and staff structure
- Remuneration strategies
- Staff development
- Performance management
- Leadership development
- Recruitment planning and processes
- Support to develop staff policies
- Planning health and safety
- Team meeting processes

DairyNZ Workshops

Workshops in the Waikato and Southland were organised by DairyNZ and held every four months through the life of the project for the farming participants. Each workshop had topics selected by the People Management Consultants to reflect their clients' needs and featured key note speakers and practical exercises.

Topics included:

- Communication
- People Management Plans
- Leadership
- Staff engagement
- Lessons from rural CEOs
- Dairy Base analysis and Key Performance Indicators

Project Reviews

The project was monitored and reviewed three times over the two years. The purpose of the review was to measure changes in farm productivity, team performance, individual work satisfaction and changes in the farm working environments. A mixed-method approach was selected for the reviews combining quantitative measures with narrative analyses. The first review used the Gallup Q12 as the quantitative measure along with individual interviews and the Most Significant Change method. The second review again used the Gallop Q12 but this time replaced the Most Significant Change method with workshops and building Concept Pyramids. This change reduced the cost for this stage in the project. The third review went back to a quantitative but subjective questionnaire to be used alongside collecting the MSC.

Combining these methods in a mixed-method approach was considered by the authors to provide a number of advantages for the review: The Gallup Q12 measured work satisfaction results that could be directly related to gains in business productivity and that were well attested internationally and across many industries. The CPM provided a way of understanding how peoples' behaviour was being influenced by patterns of leadership, management, organisation, and training. The MSC provided insight into people's learning within the context that formed it.

Gallup Q12 is a quantitative but subjective approach for measuring organisational staff commitment and performance. The Gallup approach may be described as:

individual performance = talent x (relationships + expectation alignment + recognition including reward).

Based on over seven million staff assessments it uses twelve questions that are highly correlated with business or work unit profitability, productivity, employee retention, customer satisfaction and loyalty, reduced absenteeism and decreased merchandise loss (Harter et. al. 2008).

In November 2015 and May 2016, a questionnaire was sent by email to all project participants. On farms where there were more than three staff members reporting to a single manager, the questionnaire was also sent to all the staff. The completed questionnaires were returned directly to Gallup where the results were analysed and reported back to DairyNZ.

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a qualitative approach to the collection of self-reported data about changes that occur within the context of implementing projects such as the People Lift Project. The MSC method makes use of a research approach to document peoples' learning as it occurs within a project intervention. The narrative process of recalling, reflecting on and articulating significant events was itself intended to encourage further consolidation of changes in behaviour (Dart and Davies 2005). The MSC results were specific to each farm, each business team, and each person, and these were gathered in the language of the interviewee to describe their learning and how that had been consolidated in behaviour change.

The narrative process was slightly adapted from the original design of the method in order that it might have both the flow of a conversation and yet consistency in structure for further analyses. Two agricultural students were employed for the interviews and trained in MSC by the authors. All the participants in the project were invited to be interviewed on their own property, about their experiences while they were involved in the project. Every farm's manager of employees was interviewed plus their partner (e.g. husband or wife) and one employee, so that up to three people per farm might be interviewed. People were interviewed individually and separately if possible and the presence of any others at the interview noted. At the beginning of each interview, ethics approval was asked for and any special conditions that might be requested noted.

The interviewers verbally encouraged the participants through their narratives and wrote the stories down as they presented them. They then read back through the narratives to clarify and verify their content with the participants. At the end of each interview the interviewer could add in a separate section, their own comments about what they learnt from conducting the interview.

Where any post-interview actions had been arranged with the participant, these were noted to be followed up in a timely way, e.g. arrangements for subsequent counselling.

There were four People Management Consultants associated with the project and three of them were interviewed in similar discussions as those held with the farmer participants. They were asked about what had motivated them to be part of the project, and what they had learnt from being involved.

Concept pyramid method (CPM) is based on a clinical psychology theory of personal constructs. It represents an association of meanings and the relationships between meanings and behaviour as they are identified by the participants present. The words that people use to convey their personal constructs are those that are most relevant to them and represent the underlying beliefs that influence their behaviour (Parminter and Perkins 1996).

During 2015 two workshops were held in November (Waikato) and December (Southland). At the workshops farmers broke into three to four subgroups with a topic for each subgroup to focus on. The focus topics had first been selected by the farmers at the workshops as being most relevant to them. They then had an hour to brainstorm their ideas about the focus topic and list these on post-it notes and then cluster them into key areas describing their recent staff management experiences about making "your farm a great place to work". In the Waikato the focus topics were: people to step up – "getting people to step up and take more ownership of their role"; values and communication – "getting staff on the same page as the business"; clarity and leadership – "recruiting the right person for the team"; and an opportunity to develop – "giving the employees the opportunity to do some extra work to develop their skills on the farm". In Southland the selected focus topics were: efficient productivity – "training people in new skills"; work life balance – "decreasing workloads"; culture, enjoyment and engagement – "encouraging and celebrating successes".

Data Analyses were carried out using NVivo® to code both the quantitative and qualitative data. Analysis of the MSC narratives was first done using open coding and then further coding was carried out using selective coding to focus on the main themes identified in the previous step (Glaser and Strauss 2009).

Results

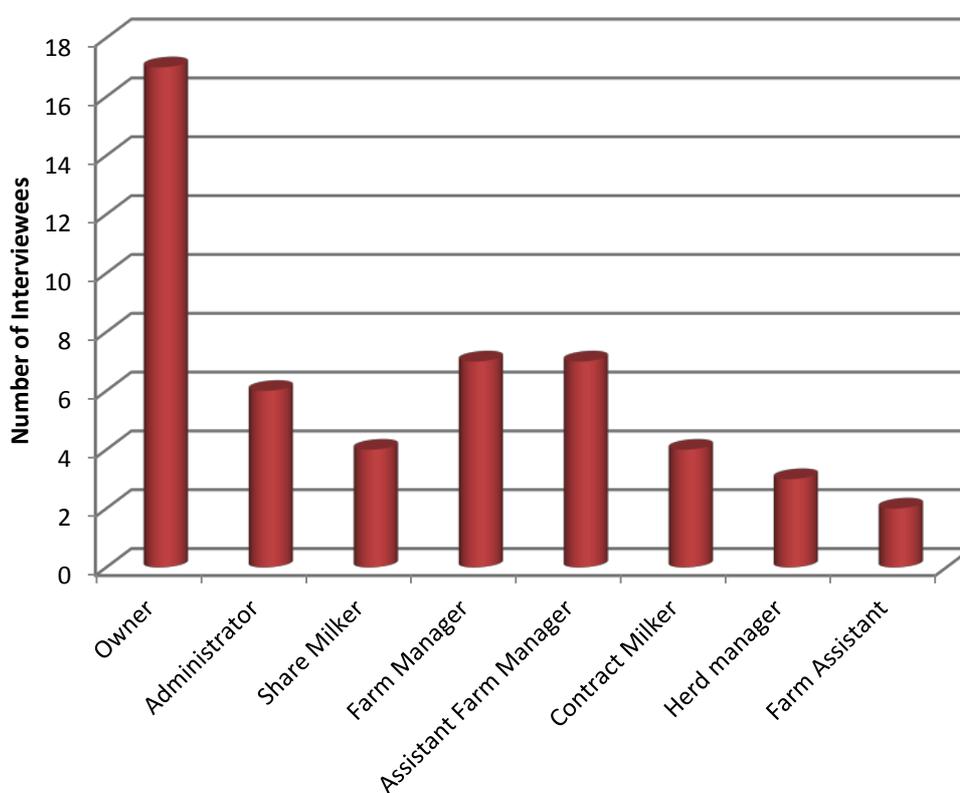
On-farm interviews

In the on-farm interviews that were included with the MSC, the participants described their personal and professional backgrounds, and their expectations for the project.

Interviewee Backgrounds

In year one of the project, there were two surveyors involved but in year two, one surveyor interviewed all 50 people working on twenty farms. The average age of the interviewees was 36-40 years; about half of them were male (57%) and almost all had Kiwi and European ethnicity (86%). Over half the interviewees came from the Waikato (63%) and the rest from Southland. About half the interviewees were owners, or administrators (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The role on farms of the review interviewees



Expectations of People Lift

Most people became part of the People Lift project through being invited to join by a DairyNZ consultant or an off-farm professional. People were motivated to participate by their desire for more experience in staff management, in order to resolve staffing problems, or to become more compliant with employer statutory obligations:

We realise that we weren't perfect, that we hadn't communicated our expectations of the contracts properly, which lead to issues with accountability. In the past we've been taking people willy nilly into the business, now we realise that we need to get the right people into the business (Farm owner).

Other participants wanted a learning challenge:

We want to be as good employers as we can be. We want to go from good to great. We want people to work here. It's satisfying to watch people grow and develop (Farm owner).

After two years of involvement in the project, some managers and staff were still feeling obligated to continue to participate :

I didn't know I was part of the project. First thing I heard was when [the boss] said you were coming down to the shed to talk to me. I hadn't heard about it. .. now I do know what you are talking about, I just didn't know that it was called People Lift (Assistant Farm Manager).

Most people felt that People Lift had met or exceeded their expectations (60% overall). A proportion of those people also described some negative experiences in People Lift (33%). Participants reported that the project had provided them with learning opportunities, built up their confidence, and given them access to consultant problem solving.

It's exceeded my expectations. It's got us on the right track to go forwards. It's teaching us how to deal with staff, and teaching us the right way to interview staff – the right questions to ask. It's taught us the procedures to put in place. Owner

[The People Consultant is] our HR lady. She was here yesterday, and the staff all had a one on one with her. Her involvement has been excellent. The value we get from [the People Consultant] is the empowering to do the hiring. She doesn't just focus on getting the right staff. It's more in depth than that for us; it's about managing the staff. She's a good sounding board. ... (Farm owner).

Many people had some positive things to say about the People Lift project (73% overall). Some people had mainly been disappointed by People Lift (27% overall). And some people (50%) provided mixed feedback about how well the People Lift project met their expectations. The people feeling disappointed, described the project as lacking in focus, with insufficient practical content and the programme as unbalanced:

I've been a bit disappointed. I would give the concept 10 out of 10 but give the execution 3 out of 10. There have been 2 tiers of people in this project: those that are starting out and those that are more advanced. The second group have not had their needs met. They should have broken this into 2 groups so everyone had their needs met (Farm owner).

In our industry, we get people straight out of school and we expect them to be leaders or bosses and know how to work with staff. No one tells them how to do this. If you sit down with staff and ask them, what's going to make their employers happy? What makes a good worker? They aren't sure ... (Farm manager).

Feedback about consultants

The project required farmers and People Management Consultants to work together in order to understand their staff management style, address problem areas and realise management opportunities. Generally these relationships went well, but not for one farmer:

We want to keep [the People Management Consultant] on after the project. [We] talked about it yesterday after they had been, but we haven't talked to them about it yet (Farm owner).

It's just right for us. We can email or phone and [the People Management Consultant] is there. They don't hound us (Sharemilker).

We've never had consultants on the farm before. We usually just talk to other farmers. It didn't work out for us. Our opinion of consultants is low. It hasn't added value or added to our bottom line (Farm Manager).

Feedback about workshops

Most of the farmers and some of the staff attended workshops through each year.

It's reinforced what I already knew. The most valuable thing has been the interactions with the like-minded people, the friendships I've made, the contacts and the information I've got from them. ... I haven't been bored. It's been well managed (Farm owner).

We've changed everything and we want more workshops. The best part is talking to the other farmers as we're all in the same boat and the motivational speakers. We've changed our approach with people. We thought we were good before. Now we've learnt to think before you speak. We're dealing with staff differently. We're passing on people skills to the unit managers. ... one of our unit managers needs to grow in people skills. It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. He finds it hard to communicate with staff – to explain and to talk to them. To keep good staff, we need to train [him] up (Administrator).

I only went to the first workshop. It was a refresher sort of thing. I had already done an HR course with my previous employer (Manager).

Project Review

During their review interviews the interviewees reflected on the last few months on the farm and considered what one of the most significant changes had been. These changes were not restricted to People Lift, but in most examples, they were related to peoples' involvement in the project. The following response is just one of those experiences. In this example the narrative is centred on 'staff ownership' and their growing sense of responsibility towards the farming

business. This narrative was scored very highly by the interviewee for how much it affected the farming business and how much it reflected the change in their own ability to contribute more towards the farm business.

The dairy farm's burning money – it's losing more dollars every day that we are milking cows. ... Initially I was pissed off. Then I was concerned, but being concerned made me motivated to find other ways to make money. I've employed another staff member in the drystock business, so he's driving the tractor rather than me. I'm making the business decisions and out talking to people rather than being on the tractor. Now I feel motivated. I'm still pissed off, but motivated.

We're now more focussed on staff management. If they all got unhappy and left, I couldn't do it all myself. I look for ways to find out what's important for each person, personal growth for each person. Those are HR buzzwords. This year everyone's staying. No-one's leaving. That's the first time that's happened for me. It's given me more flexibility. I don't need to be around. There's nothing that we can't sort out over the phone. It's given me the opportunity to diversify and to look for opportunities. I've given people ownership to try. I'm more hands off day-to-day and I've given people more responsibility. Our cow production is way up. I've given the two herd managers more ownership over their own herds, and they might be out at 8 o'clock at night checking their herds. Before I had more of a supervisor role, but now I leave them to it and they ring me if they have a problem (Farm owner).

People Management Consultants' interviews

For the consultants, participating in the project provided them with opportunities to expand their client base and work with farmers that hadn't previously put much priority on developing their people management skills. Participation in the project also required the People Management Consultants to work collaboratively with each other and with dairy industry leaders. In their narrative interview one of the People Management Consultants said:

I got involved because it has been an opportunity to work with my rural peers and with DairyNZ. It is a way of supporting the industry and DairyNZ.

We had our group of clients and we pretty much stuck to them. I would have liked to build up a more sharing culture with other consultants, but it didn't happen, although more support was achieved than I thought might have been possible at the start. It has helped me to grow my soft skills. We could have supported each other more but needed a deliberate effort to overcome the competitive nature of the industry.

Participating in People Lift has made me more sensitive to meeting the needs of my clients. I had to think about and analyse more about how to meet their needs. Level One seemed to be developing employment agreements, orientation, training and career development. Level Two was more about coaching, mentoring and developing soft skills (Consultant).

Advisory Committee feedback about the project

The Committee considered the MSC stories when they met in July 2016. At the meeting the committee shared with the others those narratives that particularly stood out for them. These included the farmer story presented earlier in this paper. *"The dairy farm's burning money every day we are milking cows ... I was pissed off ... now we're more focussed on staff management ... people have more responsibility .. our cow production is way up."*

About that story the committee said:

This story describes how participating in the project increased the resilience of the farmer and the farm business when they were both in a very difficult situation. It fits the core purpose of the project. In the story the farmer turns from being initially upset and pissed off about money concerns into a new focus on staff management so that people were taking more responsibility for their work. Production even went up.

This story highlights that often a catalyst for change is needed. People can know what to do but not do it. In this case the dairy downturn provided the catalyst. In other situations it may be being let down by a staff member or being challenged by a spouse or family member. The farm owner in this story is forced to consider other options because his existing farming system is not profitable.

After participating for two years in this project it should have been possible for people to start to see significant change from their involvement and see the value from their participation. However, the committee felt that the whole shape of the project had changed as a result of the low payout being received in 2016. That made it harder for the project leaders to be drivers for change.

When the committee compared the latest farmer stories with the ones collected in the previous two years, they considered that people in the latest stories sounded more tired and fatigued. The committee felt that some farmers thought that they had to 'exploit their staff' in order to stay financially viable. Farmers in such situations were going to resist the changes being

brought to bear by this project. Similarly some staff in these circumstances could also have expectations not able to be met by this project.

The on-farm changes that required additional investment and/or resources were always going to be more stressful and slower than other more non-demanding changes in this project. This could become a self-perpetuating problem.

Generally the farmer participants considered the project to be a 'free service' being provided by DairyNZ. Their participation was therefore assessed as being 'without obligation'. The committee considered that rather than having a direct grant scheme, it might be more helpful with similar projects in the future to provide participants with a rebate on their project fee, subject to their active participation.

The farm teams in this project were self-selected. They were not screened to ensure that they came from particular situations or to ensure that they have expectations that the project could easily meet. The committee considered that maybe the project leaders had been unrealistic about the capabilities of the farmer participants in the project to absorb all the new information that they were being presented with and then to put it into practice.

Contributing towards the difficulties of the hurdle was that it was recognised that farmers were not generally trained in business management and expecting them to learn these skills along with staff management over a two year period was a big step – maybe it was too big a step. The industry might be more effective if it designed a long term programme capable of achieving a generational change rather than expecting a short term response. The emphasis has been on the rewards that people can expect but it isn't just 'milk and money'. Introducing a new culture with changed staff management could initially result in higher staff turn-over as people found out that they didn't want to, or couldn't, adapt and preferred to leave.

From the information that they had, the committee felt that there were three areas were farmers and their staff needed to grow in responsibility – land, livestock and people. In all three areas the industry had to develop a culture of 'duty of care' that meant much more than just satisfying the need for compliance.

Project Conclusions

This paper describes an approach being taken to increase people management skills across the dairy industry. Something that some dairy farmers have said their industry, "is particularly bad at". The results highlight opportunities that can be addressed in future projects addressing this topic.

Farmers have a range of expectations about what might be included in people management. Market segmentation might have assisted the industry to direct its resources towards the farming teams best able to respond to interventions by People Management Consultants. There seemed to be a 'bimodal' population of farmers in the review results. Some farmers primarily wanted to be involved in the project to develop their own skills in staff management. These farmers did not really involve their staff in the project. Other farmers wanted the project to develop the capability of the team of people on their farm. The staff in this second group of farms were aware of the project and may have participated more in on-farm discussions and workshops with their People Management Consultant.

There is an opportunity to grow farmer people management skills through a more staged process than was achieved in this initial project and so avoid overloading participant expectations.

- Initially many farmers focussed on ensuring that they were compliant with the relevant rules and regulations in order that they then had 'freedom to operate' and manage their own farming system. People Lift provided these farmers with the systems and processes that they needed to be compliant. In their relationships with those farmers, the People Management Consultants could be quite directive and prescriptive about what needed to be done.
- In the second stage of their people management development, farmers wanted skills to assist them in leading their teams from 'out front. People Lift provided these farmers with skills in interviewing, communication, performance evaluation, feedback, discipline and career development. To support these farmers, the People Management Consultants role was more facilitation and mentoring.
- In the third stage the emphasis was on working together as a farm business team. The farmer may have had less technical ability than some of the staff being employed and may not have even led the team in some situations. People Lift provided these farmers with skills in forming a team, problem solving, experiential learning, project management,

and conflict management. The People Management Consultants were advisors to these farm business teams for inquiry, reflection and sense-making.

During the project the participants developed a People Management Plan for their farm and then presented it at the second workshop. It would have been helpful for the project if the plan could have been clearer about the people management skills already being observed on farms and the stages (from 1 to 3 above) that the teams wanted to reach. These People Management Plans should have been included in each consultant's own workplans as something that they then needed to implement. The workshops could then have kept ramping up the pressure for farm system change in people management instead of allowing the farmers to reach a plateau after their first few easy gains. Even then might have been that some farmers would still have been satisfied with reaching stages one or two and not progressing further.

Acknowledgements

The authors appreciate the support and enthusiasm of the participating farmers and farm staff. The authors thank David Gray, Senior Lecturer in Farm Management for checking that the project reached an academic ethical standard. We could not have carried out the project without funding from DairyNZ and the PGP programme. We hope that for everybody involved that these results provide a lot of opportunity for further learning, both now, and in the future.

References

- Harter JK, Schmidt FL, Killham EA, & Asplund JW 2008. *Q12® Meta-Analysis*. Gallup, Washington DC
- Dart J & Davies R. 2005. The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use. Accessed from <http://www.clearhorizon.com.au/publication/the-most-significant-changemsc-technique/>
- Glaser BG & Strauss AL. 2009. Theoretical sampling. In *Sociological methods. A source book*, seventh edition, edited by NK Denzin, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, pp 105-114.
- Parminter TG, & Perkins AML 1996. The application of systems analyses to group goal setting. *Proceedings of the New Zealand Economics Agricultural Society*, Blenheim, New Zealand, p186-190.