

# Blackfoot Farms

## **Scenario A:**

Communication and  
Employee Relations

## PROJECT TEAM

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**Please note:** All company and individual names in this case are fictional.

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This case begins with introductory information about the organization and is then divided into three scenarios.

Each scenario includes question sets for **undergraduate** and **graduate** students. A debrief is included with each scenario, but because management dilemmas can be resolved using a variety of solutions, expect that students may come up with solutions that differ from those included in the scenarios. This document contains only Scenario A: Communication and Employee Relations. The scenarios are as follows:

- **Scenario A:** Communication and Employee Relations
- **Scenario B:** Ethics and Mistreatment of Animals
- **Scenario C:** HR Technology/Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

# Overview

Blackfoot Farms has been a leading producer of dairy products for the southeastern region of Idaho since 1942. It is the second largest of the 600 dairy farms in Idaho, a state which has the fourth highest number of dairy farms in the United States, surpassed only by California, Wisconsin and New York. Like in other states across the country, Idaho dairy farms are declining in number for economic reasons. Dairy product prices in the U.S. have dropped dramatically during the past four years because the industry's production capacity has met demand nationally and internationally. A strong dollar also makes it difficult for foreign consumers to afford U.S. dairy exports. Fewer exports and the money associated with them have forced many U.S. farms to sell off their operations to competitors. Luckily for Blackfoot Farms, only about 3 percent of its dairy production is exported outside the U.S.

Blackfoot Farms has had a long-term strategy for more than 20 years to become larger and more productive. Blackfoot Farms bought three adjoining farms between 1995 and 2005, expanding its holdings to its current 3,000 acres. Family-owned and operated for four generations, Blackfoot Farms began with a herd of 15 cows and 225 chickens on roughly 100 acres of land five miles west of the town of Blackfoot, Idaho. Today, Blackfoot Farms is home to 2,000 cows and 3.5 million chickens.

The latest expansion required the farm to hire workers at a faster rate than ever before. The number of employees in its production facilities increased more than 125 percent during that 10-year period. As the farm continued to add new employees, it also began investing in technology to become more efficient in its rapidly growing dairy and egg production facilities. Blackfoot Farms currently employs 245 full-time and 140 seasonal employees. Thirty-five percent of the workforce are immigrants, the majority of whom originate from Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Dairy farms that hire immigrant laborers are often vilified because people feel they are taking away jobs from U.S. citizens. Blackfoot Farms, like many in a similar position, is quick to defend its hiring practices. In a recent interview with a local television station, Blackfoot Farms CEO Mitch Alexander said, "I don't know if we could exist without our immigrant workers. They are hardworking, dependable and willing to learn. We have hired local residents

who have been exceptional workers. To be frank, though, there aren't a lot of them lining up for work." With a smile, he added, "It's not easy work. Let's just say the conditions are less than ideal for most, and we can't have everyone working the 9-to-5 shift. Cows can't milk themselves."

Blackfoot Farms knows that despite its strong position in the market, it needs to adapt to changing conditions to be successful in the long term. The farm currently has state-of-the-art processing and production plants for its milk and egg operations. Two of the three dairy production facilities have already reached capacity, and the third is expected to be at capacity within the next two years. The farm recently broke ground on a fourth facility, which will be completed in nine months. Blackfoot also recently redesigned its manufacturing plant to increase production because of demand for other beverages it makes, including iced tea, lemonade and fruit drinks. Blackfoot Farms is a top supplier to major supermarket chains in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Utah, providing supermarkets with its full beverage line and egg products.

Blackfoot Farms opened its first restaurant in 1997 next to its headquarters, with a second restaurant opening in 2006 just 10 miles north of Idaho Falls. A visitor center was added in 1998 and has grown significantly over the years to include a gift shop. The center also hosts farm tours throughout the year to thousands of guests. Blackfoot Farms believes its strategic diversification over the past 20 years has helped it navigate market fluctuations caused by the economy and extreme weather conditions.

## FOURTH-GENERATION FAMILY FARMING

Blackfoot Farms CEO Mitch Alexander spent the majority of his childhood on the farm. His father and grandfather often talked about how interested Mitch became in farming at an early age, peppering them with questions about different areas of the operation. Mitch earned his bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Idaho. He spent the next 15 years after graduation overseeing every operation at Blackfoot Farms, with exception of the restaurant. He was promoted to general manager in 1998 and served in that capacity under his father's guidance until his father's retirement in 2005.

Mitch met his wife, Suzanne, at the University of Idaho. Suzanne has since pursued her passion in marketing and communications to build and oversee Blackfoot's marketing department. It was Suzanne's vision that led to the creation of the visitor center, which attracts multiple generations to Blackfoot Farms.

Mitch and Suzanne have three children. Bryce is their oldest and has been the general manager of Blackfoot Farms for the past eight years. He has a background in logistics and supply chain management. Before his current

role, Bryce oversaw the shipping and receiving department for four years. Mitch and Suzanne's oldest daughter, Jan, has been the director of finance for the past four years. She joined Blackfoot Farms after college and worked as an accounting clerk and budget manager for the farm for six years before assuming her current role.

Sara is the youngest of the three. Unlike her siblings, she did not have a direct path to Blackfoot Farms. Sara, known by her parents as the “free spirit” of the family, decided that she wanted to create her own opportunities and not rely on her family to get her a job at Blackfoot. Sara studied to be a secondary education teacher at the University of Idaho but realized during her student teaching experience that teaching was not the career for her. After graduation she accepted a position as a human resource specialist for a *Fortune* 500 global food supplier. After three years in that role, she took a job as an organizational development consultant for another *Fortune* 500 company. Her specialty was organizational change initiatives, including corporate restructuring.

Mitch has always been concerned about how his family is perceived by his employees and the public. He doesn't want employees to think his children were handed management positions. He made it clear to Bryce and Jan when they joined the business that they would have to learn the entire operation from the ground up. Both started by milking cows and caring for the chickens.

## THE BRIEF UNSUCCESSFUL HISTORY OF HUMAN RESOURCES AT BLACKFOOT FARMS

The human resource (HR) department at Blackfoot Farms consists of three full-time employees—an HR manager, an HR coordinator and a payroll clerk—and a part-time HR assistant. The organization hired its first HR professional in 1998 when it added its retail operation. As the organization grew and diversified, the management team realized it needed to formalize its HR systems. Mitch felt that the complexities of running the farm required managers to become less hands-on and to think more strategically; he also believed that laborers should become more specialized. This was Mitch's ideal scenario, but the reality was far from ideal. Despite an intentional shift to formalize HR, all of the divisions—including the production facilities—continued to operate as they did before. Encouraging managers to think and operate more strategically continues to be a challenge. For example, Mitch has expressed his frustration to Bryce that production supervisors are not taking full advantage of the additional data being gathered through recent technological advances to support the farm's long-term growth. They also lack core supervisory skills to motivate employees to perform their best.

Recruiting and retaining employees with the appropriate skills continues to be a challenge. Many production employees join Blackfoot without any previous farming experience. There is also significant employee turnover in the production facilities, primarily in the nonimmigrant labor force. And the lack of advancement opportunities frustrates employees. Although HR programs like onboarding and professional development are becoming formalized, managers are not consistent in enforcing HR policies with their staff. In addition, establishing performance goals, performance evaluation systems, effective recruiting and employee training have had limited success. Employee turnover has increased nearly 25 percent during the past five years, and managers are beginning to realize that practices need to change to become more productive in the long run.

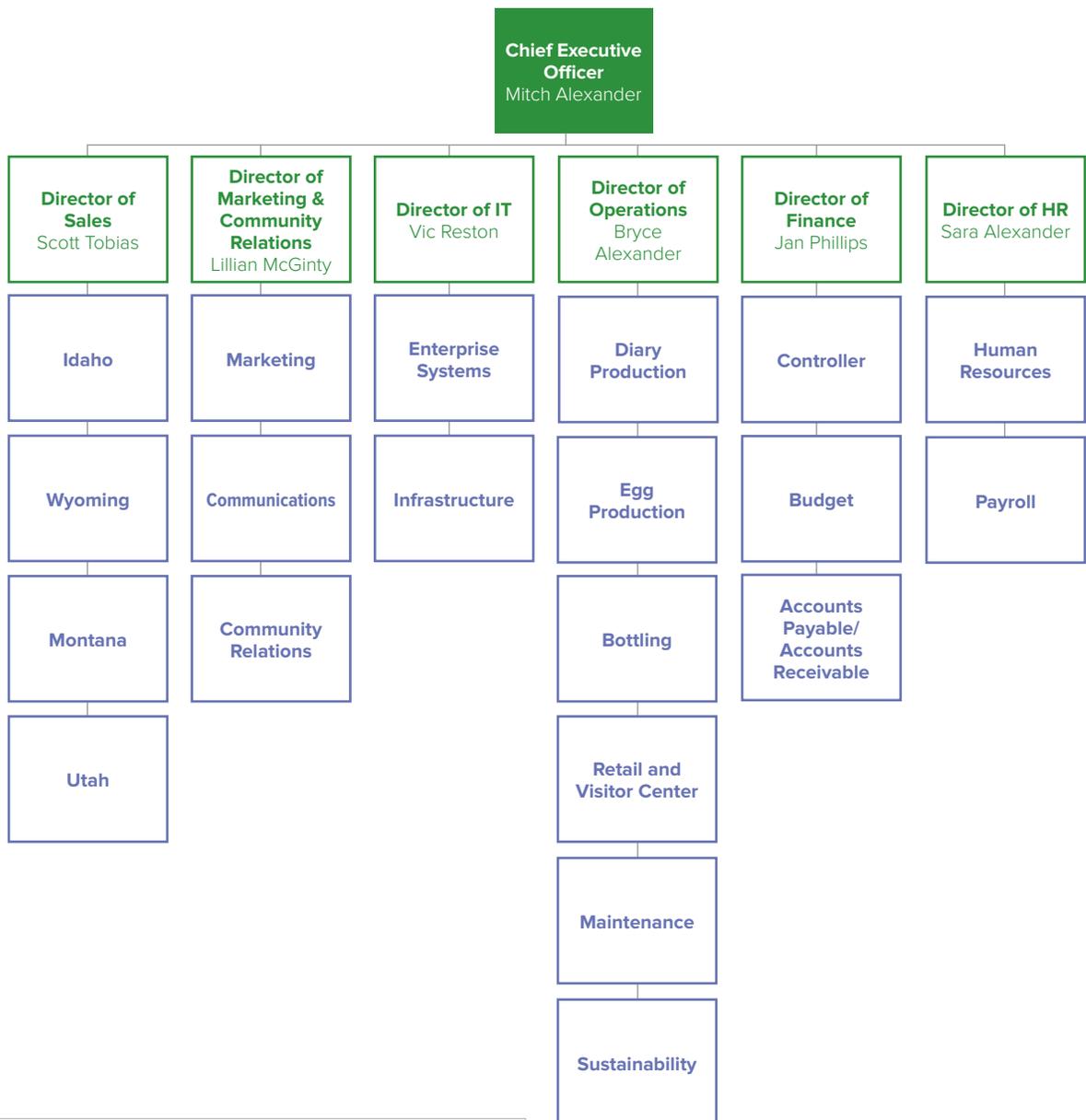
Mitch understands that the farm's past investment in HR has not provided the results he wanted to achieve. He has contemplated for several days about calling his youngest daughter, who he knew would be able to build the HR systems Blackfoot required. Mitch has been hesitant to call Sara because he knew she wanted to create her own future. He also knew how fulfilling her career had been; all he ever wanted was to see his children happy in their chosen profession. Blackfoot Farms was experiencing a series of workforce challenges, however, including recruiting and cross-cultural communication. These challenges led to the departure of their second HR manager in five years and the third in 10 years. The last two managers cited "relocation" as the reason for leaving, but Mitch knew the fit had not been ideal in both instances. Both had sound HR backgrounds but lacked the strategic perspective Blackfoot Farms desperately needed. Cultural issues at Blackfoot—mainly resistance to formal HR policies and procedures—also have contributed to the lack of progress.

Mitch wondered how much of this failure was due to his own lack of appreciation for the HR function. He certainly was not proud that the HR manager position had turned over three times in a 10-year period. It is never easy to revise policies and procedures in a change-resistant culture like Blackfoot Farms. Did he want his own daughter to experience those challenges? Whatever he decided, he knew he needed to get it right this time. Despite a lack of HR systems, Blackfoot had been successful, but Mitch knew advancing HR was critical to maintaining and growing Blackfoot Farms in the long term.

Mitch held a series of conversations with Sara and finally convinced her to join the family organization. The last conversation took place over a holiday weekend when Sara was visiting her family. Mitch and Sara walked around the farm after dinner one night and discussed several topics. When Sara asked if she would be reporting to her sister, Jan (director of finance), Mitch laughed to deflect the awkwardness of the moment. Sara took this as a "yes."

The previous HR managers reported to the director of finance, the last two reporting to Jan. Sara stopped and turned to her father, “You’ve gone through three HR managers in 10 years. I don’t want any special treatment, and I mean no disrespect to Jan. But if you want to have a strong HR operation and one that is finally respected, I need to report to you.” Mitch hesitated briefly and said, “I need to talk with your sister, but I think it will be a welcome relief for her. She would be the first to admit that she didn’t give HR the support it needed. It will be a director-level position, titled director of human resources since you’ll be reporting directly to me.” Sara Alexander became the newest employee of Blackfoot Farms two months later.

**Figure 1: Organizational Structure: Blackfoot Farms**



**Figure 2: Human Resource Department Structure: Blackfoot Farms**



**Figure 3: Number of Employees by Department**

Department	Full-Time	Part-Time/Seasonal
Dairy Production	47	23
Egg Production	29	12
Bottling Production	22	10
Retail and Visitor Center	14	36
Restaurant Operation	37	35
Maintenance	24	8
Sustainability	8	1
Administration (marketing, communications, IT, HR, finance, sales, senior management)	64	15
<b>Total Employees</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>140</b>

# Scenario A: Communication and Employee Relations

## In Sara's Office

Sara was sitting at her desk on just the second day of her new job. Her desk was relatively clear, with the exception of her computer, phone and a welcoming bouquet of flowers and balloons provided by her mother. On the corner of her desk were a few files that she had asked her part-time administrative assistant, Shirley Kemp, to provide for her review. Shirley was now reporting to her third supervisor since joining Blackfoot Farms five years ago. Shirley retired after working for 40 years at a bank in Blackfoot. She liked the ability to work a few hours a day, but the revolving door of HR managers has been difficult for her.

Sara, consumed by her own thoughts, second-guessed her decision to join the family organization. She had a strong relationship with her parents, sister and brother, but always feared this relationship would be compromised if she joined the family business. In addition, she had left a truly enjoyable job that combined challenging work with world travel. What gave Sara the most anxiety, though, was the lack of progress made by the past HR managers. Several questions ran through her mind. How could this be? Why weren't they successful? Why did they leave so soon? Why was the culture resisting HR? Would she suffer the same fate as her predecessors?

Sara turned her attention to the task at hand. Her father, Mitch, was going to start introducing Sara this afternoon to employees in each area of the operation, a process that would take the next month. When she spoke with her father about joining Blackfoot Farms weeks earlier, Sara asked him what he thought was the biggest challenge relating to the workforce. Mitch immediately said that the availability of labor to process milk and eggs was the biggest HR challenge. Blackfoot relied heavily on immigrant labor to staff its production facilities; approximately 35 percent of the overall workforce and 80 percent of the production departments were immigrants. During their conversation, Mitch said, "Farm labor is certainly not for everyone." She agreed saying, half-jokingly, "I know. If it was, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Sara had worked as a farmhand throughout high school and college. She knew everything about the long, difficult hours that often lead to conflict among employees in the production facilities. This tension could be definitely magnified between the immigrant and nonimmigrant workers because of communication barriers. She knew based on her own experience that silos had been created over the years because employees communicated primarily with those of similar backgrounds. Although she witnessed this years ago, she had to find out for herself sooner rather than later if this was still the case.

She had noticed when she reviewed the employee files that there was a clear distinction between the immigrant and domestic labor forces. Although documentation was missing from the files of domestic employees, they were much more complete than those of the immigrant workers. It did appear that all employees had completed I-9 forms (Employment Eligibility Verification Form) regardless of citizenship. But Sara noticed that there were few annual performance evaluations in employee files, and they were particularly absent in the immigrant worker files. If performance documentation was included in an immigrant worker's file, it was usually a disciplinary notice.

One document that seemed to be consistent in most files was an acknowledgement that employees received and understood the contents of the employee handbook. Sara thought to herself, "Do non-English-speaking employees really understand what is in the employee handbook?" For that matter, with what she had seen so far, she wondered if even the English-speaking employees understood the contents of the handbook.

### **One Month Later**

In addition to being introduced to employees by her father during her first month at work, Sara knew it was important to spend time working with employees in each area of the organization. The operation had changed considerably since her college days, but for Sara, gaining employee trust was the primary reason she was investing time working in various operational areas. She also knew it was important to her father. Sara's activities ranged from working alongside employees in the milking parlor on the third shift to serving as a tour guide at the visitor center. The experiences gave Sara a chance to learn about Blackfoot employees, what motivated them and what interests they had outside of work.

She had also completed one of her first goals: to facilitate a series of focus group conversations among nonmanagement and management employees. She had conducted separate sessions for nonmanagement employees. She felt it was important to have nonmanagement immigrant employees in separate

conversations. She asked Silvia Blair, HR coordinator, to be present at each of the focus group meetings. Sara felt she could identify a number of areas that needed to be addressed just from her own observations, but she wanted to hear directly from employees about their work experiences at Blackfoot. Given the large number of immigrant laborers, communication barriers emerged as a key theme in each focus group. Sara also hosted several focus group discussions for nonmanagement employees, separating immigrant and nonimmigrant employees, to identify issues specific to each group, particularly as they pertained to communication. She chose this format as a way to continue building trust and to improve communication among employees.

Sara had minored in Spanish in college and had kept her Spanish-speaking skills sharp while working with clients during her consulting days, and her language skills benefitted the immigrant labor population in particular and Blackfoot Farms as a whole. She estimated that about 70 percent of Blackfoot Farms' immigrant workforce did not speak English. She hoped her Spanish-speaking background would help build trust among the Spanish-speaking employees. For the focus-group conversations with immigrant employees, she also hired an external consultant who was more fluent in Spanish and who had a background in conflict mediation. Sara wanted to have someone involved in the discussions who was not employed at Blackfoot Farms to create an additional sense of safety for employees who feared their feedback could result in repercussions.

Sara asked participants to complete a brief survey at the end of each focus group meeting; in the survey, employees were asked to identify what they felt were the biggest issues with the work environment. The consultant helped Spanish-speaking employees complete the survey if necessary. Sara was not surprised by what she learned in the process. Her only real surprise was that not much had changed for employees since she worked at the farm in college.

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### Survey Results: Top Five Concerns, by Employee Group

<i>Management</i>	<i>Nonmanagement: Immigrant</i>	<i>Nonmanagement: Nonimmigrant</i>
1. Communication barriers	1. Respect	1. Employee motivation
2. Recruiting and hiring	2. Communication barriers	2. Communication
3. Conflict	3. Job security	3. Compensation
4. Training	4. Employee motivation	4. Conflict
5. Employee motivation	5. Work-life balance	5. Work-life balance

### Themes from Focus Group Discussions (Management)

*From an egg production supervisor:* “I know a majority of immigrant workers don’t speak English, but there are plenty who do. I ask them to translate for me, but it’s not effective. I’m not getting what I ask for.”

*From a dairy production supervisor:* “It’s really difficult to attract people to work on a farm. It’s not just the conditions but the ‘around the clock’ schedule that people don’t want to commit to.”

*From the marketing coordinator:* “Although we have grown considerably as an organization over the years, some of us need to realize we still work for the same company with the same set of goals. I swear some people come to work just wanting to be difficult.”

*From a maintenance supervisor in dairy production:* “With our new technology, I feel like I am more of a trainer than a supervisor. I’m not focusing on the bigger picture, and I know this is affecting our operations.”

*From a visitor center supervisor:* “I’m just amazed by the differences in the generations. I have been working here for 15 years, and I never had issues with work ethic before. Now, I feel like I am catering to the new generation. Don’t even get me started about their cell phones.”

### Themes from Focus Group Discussions (Nonmanagement: Immigrant)

*From a shipping clerk:* “My supervisor yells at me whenever things don’t go well, even if it isn’t my fault. He never has taken the time to get to know me as a person. I work hard, and I want my efforts to be acknowledged.”

*From a dairy production employee (translated):* “I am at a disadvantage because I don’t speak English. I feel lost because of all the changes made to the parlor. I don’t know if I am doing a good job. They don’t tell me.”

*From a custodian (translated):* “I have been working at Blackfoot for 12 years. I love working here, but I have been cleaning all this time. I feel like I am capable of more. I just want an opportunity, but I’m afraid to talk with my supervisor. I need my job.”

*From an egg production facility worker (translated):* “I feel like most of us [immigrant workers] are working the off-shifts because of who we are. American employees complain or quit if they don’t work the first shift. I don’t think it is fair.”

*From a truck driver:* “I listen to talk radio while I’m driving. I hear so much about immigration reform. It’s unsettling. I’m concerned that one day I will be without a job. My family depends on me.”

### **Themes from Focus Group Discussions (Nonmanagement: Nonimmigrant)**

*From a marketing representative:* “I feel like I am doing the same thing every day. I enjoy managing our social media accounts, but I wish I was given more meaningful projects that are a better use of my skills.”

*From a dairy production employee:* “The language differences are becoming more and more of a challenge. We are making all of these technology changes, but we aren’t doing anything about employees who don’t speak English.”

*From a visitor center representative:* “I have a friend who works in a similar position at another company. She makes two dollars an hour more than me. She said there are openings where she works. We are going to lose workers if we aren’t competitive with our pay.”

*From a finance employee:* “It’s my job to make sure employees follow all of our expense policies. When I question someone, they get very defensive. One person hung up on me, and her supervisor called my supervisor complaining about how I treated her. Why have a policy if we are allowed to act that way?”

*From an information technology employee:* “With more and more technology being implemented, we are required to support operations like never before. With a 24/7 operation, I’m on call more than I would prefer. There always seems to be something that needs troubleshooting. We should be requiring more support from our vendors.”

## UNDERGRADUATE QUESTIONS

**What is the most effective way for Sara to communicate the results of the focus groups and the employee survey? Consider all stakeholders when writing your response.**

One of the biggest mistakes an HR professional can make when conducting focus groups and/or employee surveys is not communicating the results to those who participated, senior management or the organization at large. When employees aren't given the results, confusion typically follows and morale suffers. Employees are unsure what, if anything, was accomplished with the information they shared. The lack of communication also can have a significant impact on the response rate for similar initiatives in the future.

The first issues to identify when conducting focus groups or employee surveys are the primary purpose of the activity and the method by which the results will be communicated. These questions should be answered before the questions for the focus group or employee survey are even drafted. HR departments should develop a realistic timeline to capture key milestones to ensure a high level of participation in any employee satisfaction initiative. Furthermore, it is important to identify other organizational priorities that may affect employees' ability to be involved.

Organizations often conduct focus groups or surveys, but not both. Blackfoot Farms is wise to do both. By doing both, the company will obtain a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Using this approach, Blackfoot Farms could compare and contrast the data received from both approaches. Doing so can identify a series of themes across the organization and also cite differences that may exist among departments or employee classifications. The first message Sara and the organization need to send to employees is "we hear you." The next message is to identify short-term solutions. Some might refer to this as a "low-hanging fruit," a relatively straightforward resolution that shows employees that they were heard. This helps build morale and, in this case, trust for the HR department—a must given the department's history at Blackfoot Farms.

How the information will be shared with employees depends on the culture and what the management team feels is the best form of communication. Several options could be considered. It may be beneficial for Sara, for example, to speak to all employees in a town hall setting, sharing results, addressing next steps and answering questions. Not everyone may feel comfortable in such a setting, and it may be appropriate for Sara to speak with individual departments as well.

**Based on the findings, what would you suggest is the highest priority Sara needs to address to improve communication and employee relations? Be sure to include facts to defend your opinion.**

There is no simple solution in determining what the highest priority is for Sara given the wide variety of issues that were represented in each of the three employee groups (management, nonmanagement/immigrant and nonmanagement/nonimmigrant). Students will likely propose a wide variety of solutions. Sara and her HR colleagues will not be able to address all of the issues that were discussed in the focus groups and surveys immediately. Sara will have to prioritize to identify where she would like to focus her department's time and resources.

Blackfoot Farms' culture is one that works together but does not work collaboratively. In other words, employees work to get the job accomplished but do not spend a great deal of time building effective working relationships. Blackfoot Farms has had a tremendous amount of financial success because of production increases, but it has come at some cost in terms of employee relations.

Although Sara's emphasis has been on the immigrant versus the non-immigrant labor force, it is important that she does not overlook the different needs in terms of social class. The class people identify with can affect how they behave in the workplace as much as any other personal characteristic, including race, ethnicity or gender. Also, the more valued employees feel in the workplace, the more task-focused they will become (Rizzo, 2009).

The nonmanagement immigrant workers (at least those who were included in the process) identified a lack of respect as the most significant workplace issue. Their productivity levels, therefore, are probably not at optimal levels because they do not feel respected as individuals or for the effort they put into their jobs. The solution, though, is not as easy as offering "respect training" to all employees. Sara should work with senior management to identify values that will become the foundation for Blackfoot's future. As part of the exercise, respect for one another should be at the forefront and among the organization's core values (Maxwell, 2003).

The issues were also varied for nonmanagement nonimmigrant employees, but motivation emerged as the most significant issue. Motivation can be interpreted in a number of ways in the context of the survey results. Based on the comment from the marketing representative, however, there appears to be limited opportunity for growth and development. Motivation was also listed fourth on the list for nonmanagement immigrant respondents, indicating that it is a systemic concern management should recognize and address.

Rath and Harker (2013) place employees in one of three categories when it comes to engagement spectrum—engaged, non-engaged and actively disengaged. Engaged individuals are highly motivated on a day-to-day basis in their work. Engaged employees are supported by their supervisors and perform challenging and meaningful work that aligns with their passion, skills and interests. Rath and Harker believe 20 percent of workers are engaged. Non-engaged employees perform the bare minimum required of the position. Actively disengaged employees are not performing their duties at a satisfactory level. In the extreme cases, they may even resort to violating company rules to get terminated from the position.

In this case, a majority of Blackfoot Farms' employees are non-engaged. They are getting the work done, but the current culture and processes don't allow for them to rise to an engaged level. Much of this could be the result of the lack of opportunity offered by supervisors, as appears to be the case with the marketing representative. One can also point to the nature of the dairy farming industry, which requires repetitive functions in many of the positions.

Management responses indicate that communication is the biggest challenge they face. Similar to motivation, communication can be interpreted in many ways. Nevertheless, the comment made by the egg production supervisor suggests there are challenges with language barriers in being able to provide direction or solicit information from non-English-speaking employees. Sara may want to offer language training not only for non-English-speaking employees but also for employees for whom English is their first language. This would tie into the primary concern nonmanagement nonimmigrant employees expressed in terms of respect. Offering English-speaking employees opportunities to learn another language could have a major effect on the relationships at Blackfoot Farms. Furthermore, it would be important to offer opportunities for everyone to learn about the different cultures represented in the organization. This could be done during staff meetings or employee functions, including lunches or recognition events.

**Identify a specific issue that emerged from each employee group and recommend a solution that could be implemented within six months and one that is a bit more complex and will take more than six months. Please describe your recommended solutions in detail.**

Students will most likely identify different issues to respond to this question. It is important, however, that they describe the specific issue in detail before recommending solutions. Students should review the data from the survey and the focus groups to articulate the issue and identify potential solutions. HR staff or consultants typically look for themes from focus group discussions—in other words, issues that are repeated by the same employee group. In this case, we only have limited comments from the respondents.

As an example, students may determine that generational differences are a significant workplace issue identified by management, as was discussed by the visitor center supervisor who questioned the motivation and overall work ethic of younger generations. As a short-term solution, students may suggest that HR work with supervisors to have conversations about generational differences at staff meetings in all departments at the farm. In such a scenario, HR can facilitate a conversation that creates awareness about the four generations that exist in the workplace—Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z. In addition to creating awareness, another goal of the conversation would be to build an appreciation for the tendencies each generation brings to the organization. For example, although the visitor center supervisor is frustrated about the younger workers' use of cell phones, it might be helpful to understand that Generation Z is the first generation to be surrounded by technology since the day they were born (Wright, 2016). This doesn't excuse the behavior, and policies should be followed. The point of the exercise should be to appreciate generational differences.

For a longer-term, more complex solution, students might identify an opportunity to create cross-functional teams across the organization consisting of employees from all generations. The purpose of these teams would be to identify the various generational challenges that exist at Blackfoot Farms and to recommend potential solutions for management to implement. This is more complex given the amount of structure that would be required. It may also be more beneficial in the long run, though, because it will help build relationships not only across generations but across departments. Finally, employees will feel a sense of ownership because they were asked to recommend solutions to improve the work environment.

## GRADUATE QUESTIONS

**Identify and describe three strategies Sara could implement within the next year to address the communication barriers and conflict that exist between immigrant and nonimmigrant employees at Blackfoot Farms.**

Survey results indicate that communication was the top concern among management and the second highest concern for both immigrant and non-immigrant nonmanagement employees. Communication, therefore, should be one of the highest priorities Sara and Blackfoot Farms managers address. The strategies students identify will vary. Below are three strategies that can be used to facilitate discussion.

Based on the limited data presented in the case, it would seem that more structured opportunities for employees and managers to communicate are needed. With the ongoing growth of their operation, supervisors should, with assistance of the HR department, spend a significant amount of their time working with their direct reports. Immigrant workers prefer to be taught in a concise manner using visuals whenever possible (SDSU Extension, 2014).

Nonimmigrant dairy employees are limited in their cultural knowledge and understanding of the Spanish language. Although it would take a considerable amount of time and effort, creating awareness and appreciation would be a very important initiative for HR. One option is to offer English and Spanish language workshops. Although the expectation would not be for individuals to become fluent in a second language, giving individuals the ability to understand common words and phrases applicable to their work environment would be extremely helpful (SDSU Extension, 2014). Increasing employees' cultural awareness will be an ongoing process and should include suggestions made by employees themselves. Immigrants who come from Central America, for example, have a strong affinity for family. Therefore, giving employees the opportunity to speak about their families would offer a sense of pride. In the process, managers could identify family members who might be interested in employment at the farm.

Another recommendation might be to create bilingual versions of all important employee documentation, including the employee handbook and training materials. This would demonstrate the commitment Blackfoot Farms is making to its immigrant workforce while helping ensure that all employees understand what is expected of them.

Given the differences that exist among the employees, conflict may always exist to some degree. Blackfoot Farms, however, needs to take a more active

approach to prevent conflict from becoming dysfunctional and resulting in increased turnover or disengagement among its employees. Sara should work with managers to institute regular staff meetings to communicate updates and address any existing challenges. Managers should set the expectation that everyone should feel comfortable to speak openly to others in a respectful manner without fear of any repercussions (Patterson et al, 2012).

**Evaluate the effectiveness of each strategy you recommended in the question above. Each of the three methods must produce measurable outcomes.**

Once again, students will propose a variety of solutions. The goal is to determine the viability of the strategies suggested and ensure that evaluation methods are specific and measurable. Students who demonstrate competency will articulate the importance of evaluation when implementing HR programs. HR departments work to assess the needs of the organization and implement programs they feel will add the most value, but they often omit the final step—assessing if the program or solution did, in fact, add value. The lack of measurement is one of the reasons organizations hesitate to effectively fund HR initiatives. As with any proposal from any department that is going to require significant resources, HR must demonstrate how the investment in the resources will result in better business results in the future. To do this effectively, the evaluation phase is vital to the success.

For example, the first strategy calls for stronger communication between employees and supervisors in the production facilities. This is particularly the case with management and immigrant employees. How do you measure stronger communication? Sara needs to work with management to determine what business goals are not being met as a result of ineffective communication. On the other hand, Sara must also learn what employees wish to receive from their supervisors to perform their jobs effectively. With that information in hand, Sara can then establish a baseline (current state) and work with managers to identify a goal (future state) with a specific end date. For instance, if certain employees are not meeting production goals, the use of technology can track the level of progress being made and allow supervisors to have appropriate performance discussions to achieve the intended goals. Sara and her team can then work with managers to identify training solutions that can help increase production. To improve supervisor communication, HR can implement periodic surveys to employees—electronically, manually or face-to-face—to see if the needs of the employee population are being met by their supervisors.

HR can also monitor the effectiveness of language training. This could be done on a variety of different levels, from noting how many employees and supervisors participate in the training to measuring the proficiency levels of

the participants over a period of time. By observation, Sara and her team can see how often each individual's new language skills are being used in the workplace. In addition, translating written documentation such as the employee handbook and training manuals can have an immediate impact on the organization. For example, HR can identify a policy that is not adhered to regularly by employees and monitor to see if this has changed once employees read and understand the translated policy.

**Identify and define a list of six HR performance metrics specific to Blackfoot Farms that HR can develop and implement to illustrate the value of HR services to the organization. Be sure to defend your reasoning for the selected metrics. You can consult your responses above, but the metrics should be comprehensive in nature and not limited to the area of communication and conflict.**

Based on the information provided in the case, it is not known what, if any, performance metrics have been identified by HR and shared with the senior management team. What is tracked and reported depends on the organization's strategy and goals. It is also important for HR to work directly with the senior management team to determine what HR's roles will be in achieving the goals (SHRM, 2014).

Below is a list of potential metrics Blackfoot Farms should consider tracking. Students may provide metrics not listed. It is important for students to define each metric and to provide a viable rationale for selecting each.

- Absentee rate per employee.
- Health care costs per employee.
- Hire yield ratio.
- Job offer yield ratio.
- Overtime costs per employee.
- Profit per employee.
- Time to hire.
- Training cost per employee.
- Turnover rate per employee, per department, age, etc.
- Turnover (voluntary and involuntary).
- Workers' compensation cost per employee.

Graduate students should be fully aware of the value of identifying and implementing performance metrics that align with the organization's overall strategic goals. First, the "less is more" philosophy should be followed. Many HR departments want to identify all possible metrics to demonstrate their worth. In such instances, they usually find that senior management is not interested in information that is not directly relevant to the organization's strategic goals. In addition, metrics might be difficult to track, given the resource constraints tracking could cause departments. Also, the feasibility of capturing the data is an important consideration. It is no use trying to track performance metrics in which you either do not have the staff to support or the technology to enable. Also, it is important to determine how often the data will be reported and to whom. Finally, having a data trend for the identified metrics will allow organizations to make the most effective decisions.

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