




TRAINING EXCELLENT MANAGERS

Alex Baines, an arable farmer from Essex, is taking part in AHDB's Professional Managers' Development Course and spoke to AHDB Skills Manager Tess Howe about what he's learnt.



Alex: I'm just over 30 and I've been working in agriculture all my life, mainly in the arable sector. I went straight from school to Writtle College to do a national diploma in agriculture and then a degree in agriculture and business management, which enabled me to get a job at the farm I'm still on, ten years later.

Where I am now, I've worked up through the ranks to become farm manager. It's a 1,200 ha arable farm in north-west Essex, near Saffron Walden. We cover seven different farms now, varying between stubble-to-stubble contracts to whole-farm contracts. It's a nice area of the country to work in and I enjoy it greatly.

Tess: What challenges did you have which made you want to join the course?

Alex: After leaving college, I started off operating the machinery on the farm – spraying, combine driving, etc. I progressed and the farm owner, my boss, wanted to take more of a back seat on different tasks on the farm, so I've now ended up managing the day-to-day running of the farm – purchasing, selling and the biggest role is managing our staff.

Staff are what make the farm work, but coming out of college I didn't have a lot of staff management skills. We had one short module, which covered the background, protocols and what's required legally when you're employing people, but nothing on how to deal with people or speak to people to get the best out of them. So the course has proved very useful so far. We're halfway through and I've been putting the skills I've learnt into practice, with great results.

Tess: Is there anything specific you've picked up from the course that's helped your business move forward?

Alex: In the past there's been a bit of trouble with staffing and the finger, quite rightly, was pointed at me due to my management style: I was quite aggressive. But all through this course, I've been learning how to portray myself more assertively, not aggressively, and engage with people when I'm talking to them, not talking at them.

I've been working hard on it and I can really see the benefit. I'm engaging with the employees an awful lot better and it's just a lot easier – they know what they're doing and I know what I'm doing.

Tess: So, communication is a lot clearer and that will obviously help the business. Can you put any value on that?

Alex: Retaining staff is the main benefit. In our sector, good machinery operators that are conscientious and willing to put in the hours are hard to come by now. There's a real shortage unfortunately. It's making sure that we retain those key people on our farms and showing them that we value them, and to treat them fairly and well.

Tess: You're obviously working hard on your own behaviour to improve your business. Is there anything else you've learnt from the course that you're yet to implement?

Alex: We've been talking about my skills so far, but we're also going to look at the skills that other people in the business have. We're doing a profile to see how their skills fit in and whether we could move people around the business to make the most out of their skills so that they're working in an area they enjoy.

Happy employees will perform well for us and want to stay with us.

Tess: Have you made any other positive changes?

Alex: My own personal time management is a lot better now than it ever was. I used to find myself at the computer at midnight, working things out for the next day. But now I'm more organised, I'm delegating more tasks and really just running things more efficiently so I can spend a lot more time with my family and friends. That's benefitting my own personal life and it's the same for any other sectors.

Tess: What's your advice for other people thinking about applying for the Professional Managers' Development Scheme?

Alex: Go for it. From the first interview, this course has been great. It's as much a social event as a training event and you learn as much outside of the presentations as you do in them.

The 14-month Professional Managers' Development Scheme has been designed to challenge and develop the skills of managers with staff management responsibilities to meet the industry's needs. Contact tess.howe@ahdb.org.uk to register your interest for the next programme.