

Beefing up HR in the Agri sector



Managing the fears and concerns of employees is one of the big challenges faced by Human Resource departments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of all this, they're still charged with supporting the business' bottom-line, recruiting and retaining talent, motivating employees, ensuring on-going skills development, handling admin, and payroll. The agriculture sector, designated as an essential service provider to ensure South Africa's food security during the pandemic, is an industry in which the human contribution remains critical, and where HR management during a period of crisis cannot be overstated.

27 May 2021: The agriculture industry employs 5% of South Africa's population and contributes more than R81 billion to the annual economy. Within the agri sector there is vast diversity in the skillset brought to the table by farm labourers, factory workers, and commercial and operational management. "This has led to a growing imperative for the human resources function to transcend the standard administrative expectations of process and payroll management, to a role that builds a cohesive organisational culture in which everyone feels they are valued and belong," says Cindy Nkgoeng, HR Manager at Beefmaster Group, one of the largest private employers in the Northern Cape with a workforce of over 1,000 people.

"In our business, we regard people as one of our most valuable assets, as family members," says Nkgoeng, explaining why she believes in expanding and evolving the scope of HR, particularly during a time of crisis.

"Businesses that strive for longevity to overcome the restrictions of the pandemic need to invest in their workforce. This means not only hiring people with the right fit, but keeping them onboard and equipping them to be resilient to change," says Nkgoeng.

Below is Nkgoeng's top tips for businesses who want to evolve the function of HR so as to play a more strategic role in enabling the organisation to achieve its objective.

Tip 1: Make support easy to get

Irrespective of an individual's position in a business, the value of feeling heard goes a long way towards ensuring job satisfaction. By creating a network of support for employees, as well as establishing opportunities to provide or receive mentorship, is an important part of building a positive work culture.

Tip 2: Set humanity as a core value

People development and treating employees at all levels with dignity and respect is key. Beefmaster employs people across a vast skills spectrum from Finance, Supply Chain, Administration, Sales, Operations, and Animal Science expertise, through to farm labourers and factory workers, where the needs and ambitions of each are unique.

Now more than ever it's important to uphold and recognise the rights of individual workers, and understand the different drivers that motivate them.

Tip 3: Keep your people safe

Covid-19 has brought a number of changes to the role of HR, where we've provided employee training programmes to help people deal better with the disease and understand preventative measures.

However, such interventions need to be partnered with follow-up counselling and support for affected employees.

Tip 4: Be a role model

It is important that managers take the torch and set an example for others to follow. Everyone can learn how to become a good leader, but successful leadership in the agri sector first requires a solid understanding of the industry's dynamics and unique challenges.

Good leaders will focus on employee strengths, and work to build a culture of mutual trust. They handle pressure well, communicate honestly, and recognise and reward good work.