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## Farm Management Principles

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Figure 1. A successful harvest is the result of carefully managing many tasks, both large and small. There is great joy in work well done!

EDN 118 featured an article that described the planning of an agricultural project. The article laid out a step-by-step process by which a wide variety of farms or institutional agricultural projects could be envisioned, evaluated, and ultimately articulated to help stakeholders maximize the stewardship of resources and to avoid unnecessary mistakes. Too often, these detailed and compelling visions for the future are placed into a three-ring binder, tucked away on a shelf and largely forgotten. If remembered, it is usually only as a fuzzy picture of what was hoped for. This is a real shame. The discipline and effort required to create the farm plan was just the first, and often most difficult, step in the important task of good stewardship and ongoing project management.

This follow-up article will share ideas of how to put your written farm plan to work. It will start with a brief outline of some basic project management principles. Next, it will cover a simple system used by the author to implement his farm plan. Finally, it will describe the process of ongoing planning and adjustment that is a vital part of diligent project stewardship.

## Basic Management Principles

Being a good manager is kind of like being a good friend, a good neighbor or a good spouse. As in each of these relationships, every manager is unique, with a unique set of skills and gifts, a unique personality, unique weaknesses, and a unique environment. This simply means that there are many, many ways to be a good manager. Given that good management can express itself in so many ways, what are some common traits or principles that are present in the manager of a well-managed project?

The first common trait of good managers is that they have a system to organize their work. Systems range from very informal, such as a note pad with "to do" lists, to complex computer programs synchronized to a smartphone. The important feature of any such system is that it gives the manager a way to store and retrieve information outside of their head. The best of these systems not only store information, but provide a mechanism for prioritization and a means of reminding the manager about important time-sensitive tasks.

The next common trait is the ability to communicate clearly to the team the what, how, when and why of the tasks needing to be done. The more complex and/or sophisticated the task, the more thorough the explanation should be, and the more need there will be for additional written procedures to ensure that those charged with completing the task can enjoy success. The "why" component of communication is very important, and often overlooked. When team members know why a task is being done, they have a sense of purpose that often inspires them to creatively explore better ways of accomplishing that goal.

That creative energy can be captured and utilized most effectively by managers who have systems in place for obtaining feedback. Such feedback is used by a manager to make informed decisions about the direction that a project is headed. The information will often lead a manager to reprioritize assets and to re-communicate instructions and/or purpose. It may even lead to the re-visioning of the project.

Much has been written about good management, and many other factors could be addressed, but fundamentally good project management is about effectively receiving, sorting, storing and communicating information that directs the assets and energies that are available. These traits need not all be strong in one individual; a good manager knows his or her weaknesses, and seeks partnerships that bring balance.

## A Simple System to Manage Agricultural Projects

Agricultural projects can be divided into two main categories. First are the projects that are ongoing or have regular cycles. Some examples are the care of animals, the maintenance of equipment, the planting and harvesting of seasonal crops, and record keeping. Second are one-time, or infrequent projects. Examples of this kind of project are the building of a structure, the clearing of a field, the installation of an irrigation system and the purchase of a tractor. These are the kind of projects typically outlined in the farm plan.

On the farm where I worked in Honduras, we used a simple management tool to successfully help implement our project's farm plan and to manage our team's day-to-day activities. The system is flexible enough to be used for both of the above project categories, and consists of three simple, low-tech items.

1. Clipboards
2. Simple written operating procedures
3. Project Organizers / log sheets

Clipboards and the "Project Organizer" (or a simple log sheet) are at the core of both ongoing and one-time projects. Simple, written operating procedures are an added component to those tasks that are ongoing.

## Clipboards

First, let's take a look at three uses of the clipboards. First, the clipboard serves as a convenient locator for the Project Organizers/ log sheets. Each major project has its own clipboard. Second, the clipboard serves as a visual reminder of the things that need to be addressed. Third, the clipboard is portable. It can securely hold instructions and operating procedures and can go where the work is, to provide a writing surface. Our clipboards are hung in two rows in the farm workshop. One row is for the clipboards with information on continuously ongoing projects, like moving chicken tractors and harvesting palm fruit. The second row of clipboards are for one-time projects like purchasing a new brush cutter and building benches for the greenhouse.

The clipboards that are used for ongoing work have the basic operating procedures taped to their surface. Clear packing tape is used to completely cover the paper on which the instructions are written, thus protecting them from wear and water damage. Laminating the pages would work equally well. Above the instructions, clipped onto the clipboard is either a "Project Organizer" or a simple log sheet, which serves as a place to record the tasks that have been done, including who did them and when, and also gives space for the team member to write a note. The Project Organizer worksheet is more thoroughly described below.

## Operating procedures

The next component of this simple, low-tech system is the written operating procedures. These documents can use either the written word or pictures to convey the basic information necessary for the successful completion of a task. Their intended purpose is to remind a trained worker of critical steps, so that careless mistakes can be avoided. They need not be so comprehensive as to imitate a training manual. An example of an operating procedure might look like this:

Moving Chicken Tractors:

- Move chicken tractor to fresh pasture
- Clean and refill water tanks
- Fill Feeders
- Observe birds for stress or illness
- If wind is expected - secure tractor with rope and stakes

This list may seem overly obvious, but on routine tasks like this, it is a common mistake to forget to carefully observe the condition of the birds. Also, it may be calm now, but wind might be in today's forecast. It is helpful to have this reminder in the morning, while tending the birds, as opposed to the mad scramble that ensues after the chicken tractor has been blown over and the chickens are running all over the pasture.

## **Project Organizer worksheets**

The third component of this simple system is the Project Organizer. A worksheet like this helps the project manager stay on track by providing a space for the itemization, organization, and prioritization of all of the project's details. The contents of the Project Organizer worksheet are:

- Project name
- Start and end dates
- Project purpose
- Task / activity
- Priority
- Cost
- Who will be responsible for the task
- Resources needed

Some of these items are obvious, such as "Project Name", but others warrant some additional comment. Stating the project's purpose on the project worksheet is a critical tool for helping communicate and reinforce the "why" aspect of the project. It is especially important to identify who and/or what will benefit due to the project's success. As an example, chicken tractors are not built simply for the love of creating poultry housing. They are built for the food resource provided by the eggs and meat that the birds produce, as well as the healthier pasture conditions resulting from the natural fertilizer and scratching activity of the birds. Also, the chickens eat the eggs and grubs of the parasites that infect livestock, thus reducing the need for expensive anti-parasite medication. Listing all of the beneficial outcomes on the Project Organizer worksheet serves as a reminder that we can, and should, anticipate good returns from our diligent labors.

Other important features of the Project Organizer worksheet are the start and end dates. Timelines and deadlines have proven to be critical in the success of many projects. The old saying, "If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would get done" can be all too true.

Lastly, identifying who will be responsible for completing the various tasks of the project is critical. When a project is first started, the team can be brought together and various activities can be assigned, with their associated deadlines determined. As the project progresses, team members can be reminded to check and see if they are on target. Also, as unexpected work invades a team member's day, the project manager can identify a task that might need to be reassigned or be given a new deadline. It is important that deadlines not be allowed to simply pass by, unattended to. If a deadline cannot be met, a new deadline must be given. Without strict adherence to this principle, both the team members and the manager will learn that the deadlines are meaningless, and good projects will languish.

A system such as this can be used to manage a wide variety of projects, including a small family subsistence farm, a community garden or even a complex commercial agriculture enterprise. An additional benefit of the system is that it helps with project record keeping. Once a project is completed, the information contained in the Project Planning Worksheets and work logs is easily transferred to bookkeeping and associated reporting systems. A system like this can also lead to better communication among team members, reduce the incidence of careless mistakes, keep project timelines on track and lead to a greater sense of purpose.

An important note regarding this or any system used to help organize and manage a project: It must be difficult to ignore! I used clipboards located at eye level in a frequently visited workspace. The high visibility of the clipboards served as a constant reminder of the tasks at hand.

## **Ongoing Planning and Making Adjustment to Your Original Farm Plan**

In this last section we will take a brief look at revisiting your farm plan and adjusting it to match up with new opportunities and unexpected obstacles.

Be sure to read through your existing farm plan at least once a year. In some cases, you may want to do so every six months. You will be surprised by the details that have slipped from view, and tickled by the items you were passionate about when the plan was developed, that now seem to be at cross purposes to the direction the farm is headed.

I recommend that before you take the time to revisit your farm plan, you spend a few hours recording the current status of your farm. This inventory should include the physical attributes, the human assets, the crops, the livestock and even a sketch of the environment—both physical and relational—that the farm is part of. Once this has been completed, open up the farm plan and see how the current state of the farm compares with the plans you made six months to a year before. In my experience, there will be some disappointment, but it will be far outweighed by a sense of accomplishment and possibly even a sense of wonder at the transformation brought about through the dozens of small tasks and the hundreds of baby steps that have been taken.

Now take some time to analyze each individual component of the plan. Is the component still important? Are the timelines still accurate? Do deadlines need to be adjusted? Are there new priorities? These general questions and ones more specific to your project will help you make necessary adjustments and determine new priorities. Next, go over the high points of your discoveries with your team. This is a time to celebrate and reflect. Share with them your observations, and get their feedback about your new ideas and priorities. Finally record the new directions, priorities and timelines in your farm plan document.

As we have seen, creating the farm plan is just the beginning. Don't make the mistake of making a farm plan just to let it collect dust on the shelf. Put your plan to use with simple, hard-to-ignore management tools that play to your strengths, and find partners to shore up your weaknesses. The process of thoughtful planning and the diligent execution of your plan are great ways to worship!

## For Further Reading

*Getting Things Done* by David Allen (Read after I implemented the system described in this article, but helped me organize the projects on which I am currently working)

*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* by Stephen R Covey (A good foundational reference that played a major role in the development of my overall management style)

*The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It* by Michael E. Gerber (Helped form my approach to management by teaching me to think about things systematically, breaking them down into their simplest components and building easy to follow operating procedures)