



## agriculture & rural development

Department:  
agriculture  
& rural development  
**PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL**

### **Beef Production: The Basics**

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## **Management Principles**

Effective and efficient management are prerequisites for any enterprise to achieve success and is the least costly way of enhancing production. Since people have realised the importance of good management, demand has led many training institutions to present management courses, and numerous publications on management have appeared. A study of the literature shows that a wide range of principles are proclaimed as sound management; these can be condensed into the following five steps:

- Set goal or goals
- Plan how to achieve the goal or goals
- Organise (who will do what?)
- Direct (how must tasks be done?) and
- Control (checking that desired results are achieved).

Whether the aim is to run cattle commercially or to keep cattle for other reasons, these principles remain the same.

### **Setting goals in beef production**

Most managers know that people need goals for which to strive. However, in beef production there are problems specific to beef cattle that makes it difficult to set goals. Often, goals are only attained after 5 to 10 years of hard work, a delay which can cause frustration. Rapid changes in market demand can render a goal obsolete before it is achieved. Cattle have the ability to compensate for poor management, leading people astray when evaluating data. Professor Simon of the University of Hanover stated that in cattle breeding it is often only realised that a mistake was made some generations after a decision is implemented. It has happened that by the time the error is recognised, valuable genes have been lost from the relevant gene pool and it takes a long time to correct the miscalculation.

Professor Rice, a well-known expert on animal breeding in the USA, stated in 1926 that "breeding is an art to be learned only by practice, but knowledge of principles supplies the only firm foundation for its practice". Due to the following factors, this quote is as true today as it was then and would remain valid if the word "breeding" is replaced with "beef farming":

- Breeding and beef farming are influenced by many factors *i.e.* are multifactorial in nature.
- Many aspects of breeding and beef farming are still not fully understood with the result that ideas and beliefs based on present research are often refuted by new research findings.
- Different goals demand different management procedures.

When setting goals for a beef farming enterprise, the farmer needs to:

- Find out as much as possible about the business. Information can be obtained from many sources, including literature, fellow farmers, extension officers, researchers, veterinarians and private companies involved in the industry.
- Evaluate information, especially advice from so-called experts, with care. It is often difficult to separate half-truths from the facts and a system working on one farm does not necessarily apply to a neighbouring farm.
- Evaluate successes and use the answers to expand good achievements.
- Discuss previous mistakes. People tend to avoid bad experiences and consequently shy away from discussing mistakes. However, a thorough examination of errors provides valuable experience and information which can prevent the repetition of a mistake. It is human to make mistakes and good planning will allow for error, while trying to minimize losses through blunders.

Goals must be based on existing knowledge, should consider possible future trends and must be set with due consideration of available resources. From this it follows that:

- The first step in setting goals is to do a full resource evaluation.
- Realistic goals are the result of being objective *i.e.* not allowing personal likes and dislikes to override facts. Recognising that likes and dislikes exist and should be taken into consideration, is objective, whereas allowing likes or dislikes to override facts is subjective and can lead to grave mistakes.
- Miscalculations have been made when research data or data from a neighbouring farm was applied elsewhere *e.g.* stocking rate. Stocking rate depends on a number of factors including quality and type of vegetation, slope, aspect, temperature, rainfall, type of animal and management. It is rare, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, that these factors are the same on any two farms. In any event, circumstances change over time and it is a physiological fact that adaptation is essential for survival.
- Using financial resources to override physical constraints increases input costs, making it difficult to compete with producers not suffering from the same drawbacks. Distance to market may seem easy to overcome, but transport costs are escalating and add significantly to input costs.
- Goals must be realistic and achievable. Trying to breed a super-bull in South Africa from exotic genetic material looks simple, but if the goal is local adaptation, such a goal could prove to be unattainable. A more realistic option could be to use local breeds of cattle or exotic cattle that have already been adapted locally.

## **Planning**

Many farmers are capable planners, but it is often better to make use of advisors, preferably experts in their respective fields. Highly capable people, with the best equipment and the best information at their disposal, are available. The farmer can then spend more time applying his expertise to the tasks he knows best, and above all, managing. Ultimately, advisors can advise, but the farmer must decide.

Plans should not be made by a planner in isolation or in an office. The best plans are made on the farm and depend heavily on constant consultation between the farmer and the various planners involved. Adaptive management is the only way in which an enterprise can address problems associated with changing circumstances. Recording data and decisions makes it possible to refer back later on and thus ensure that facts are not lost.

## **Organising and Directing**

Once the difficult tasks of setting goals and planning are complete, the tasks of organising and directing can be approached. Organising or deciding who must do what is usually relatively easy, but consideration should be given to a clear description of responsibilities for each worker, which prevents conflict within an organisation. Although each worker in an undertaking should be encouraged to produce at maximum, an efficient distribution of tasks

will optimise productivity. Managers are prone to demand too much from workers and especially themselves, resulting in sloppy workmanship in an effort to do more work than what is possible within the available time. A good manager is aware of the fine balance between quality and quantity of work produced. For some tasks, merit is less important than quantity, whereas with other tasks, allocating more time will make it possible to produce a quality product.

Directing or deciding how best to do a task, depends on knowledge and ability. Sadly, the art of good stockmanship is in danger of being lost because people no longer grow up with cattle, as was the case in the past. The ability to detect problems in a herd of cattle by observation is essential for efficient cattle management and is a skill only acquired through experience based on a thorough knowledge of cattle and pasture. Farmers must be realistic when delegating tasks to workers. If specific capabilities are not available amongst a farm's workers, it can be better to either obtain outside help to perform the task or, when the task is on-going, to train one or more workers to do the work. It is possible that it is more cost-effective to contract out a task. By confining every worker's efforts to the relevant worker's field of expertise, preferably tasks which that worker likes and enjoys, and ensuring that work loads are realistic, achieving optimum production is assured.

Goal orientated managers are apt to demand the best available technology for their enterprises. In beef farming the best technology is often not the most appropriate technology. Thus the use of computers for record keeping could be the best available technology, but many farmers do not have computers and it has been shown that under practical conditions less complicated and time consuming procedures can be the best because they are more appropriate.

When "crisis management" takes place relatively frequently, a manager must evaluate his management performance critically. Either planning is lacking or work loads are excessive or responsibilities are poorly distributed between workers and must be reduced or re-allocated. The process of reducing work loads could necessitate the acquisition of additional workers. However, unnecessary input costs should be avoided and before more people are employed, tasks and responsibilities must be listed and prioritised. The removal of low-priority tasks, which could prove superfluous, is often all that is needed to reduce work loads to a level where efficiency is achieved.

### **Control**

Ensuring that goals are achieved is one of the most important tasks of a manager. Some top managers delegate all their tasks, retaining only goal setting and the control function. This allows the opportunity to monitor results continuously. From an analysis of results obtained, goal achievement and existing goals can be evaluated. If non-achievement of goals is the problem, steps must be taken to rectify the situation. If a manager concludes that new goals are needed, it must be remembered that haphazard changes tend to disrupt ultimate goal achievement.

Control based on observations by a good stockman familiar with livestock and pasture, is the hall-mark of most successful beef farmers. Problems with nutrition and with pastures are often detected by people living in close contact with their livestock long before a crisis situation arises.

Thus the management process follows a cycle from goal setting, through planning, organising, directing and control, back to setting goals.

### **Goals in beef farming**

Goals may be long-term or short-term and in beef farming can be divided into production goals or breeding goals. These will be discussed under the relevant chapter headings.