Work, Ranching, and HRM Disorders

In the summer of 1979 I found myself in the mountains of western China sitting astride a horse only slightly larger than I was. My host was a Uyghur stockman who had never seen an American and tried to stay clear of Han Chinese. Our translator was a Han bureaucrat who barely spoke English and didn’t know a cow got up hind feet first.

The bureaucrat explained that livestock belonged to the state. The cattle system was much like sharecropping. The stockman and his family took care of the herd and received a percentage of the sale of the offspring. Off-take was low. Cows did not calve annually—a 60% calf crop was good.

Cows with a different ear mark were personally owned by the stockman. Each herder could own a few cows for family needs—milk, beef, hides, etc. I asked about calves from those cows. The stockman winked, smiled, and said his cows weaned a calf every year, sometimes twins. “You Uyghurs and Americans are all alike,” the Han said.

And truck drivers, I thought. A few years earlier some friends and I bought long haul trucks and put them in a pool. Each truck had a high-performance engine that was supposed to get 5 miles per gallon. The first quarter of operation, trucks got less than 3 miles per gallon, time between loads was excessive, and load selection unacceptable. We lost money.

We changed contracts to pay drivers by mile driven and credited part of his rig’s net profit toward the driver’s eventual ownership of the truck. Mileage jumped to 4.9 miles per gallon. Trucks rarely sat idle and drivers competed for the highest paying loads. When workers shared the profit and owned part of the truck, everyone made money.

My recent column on the worth of our work received many comments: people who work with land do so because they believe what they do is important.

Their job satisfaction seldom comes from a single act; it is the outcome of a process. They believe work’s true worth is its effect on people who use products from the land.

Like people profiled in Studs Terkel’s book, Working, land-care workers searched for daily meaning as well as daily bread. Most dissatisfaction came when the worker was restricted by rules he did not understand or the value of his work was not evident.

The theme of this issue of Rangelands is human resource management (HRM). I have not read the papers by others included here. My opinions are based on working with stockmen and land-care professionals. My biases come from fights with personnel managers who tried to make people in the college where I served as dean fit rules, bureaucracy, and restrictions of the university.

Wikipedia defines HRM as “the strategic and coherent approach to the management of an organization’s most valued assets—the people working there who individually and collectively contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the business.” In other words,
HRM means employing people; developing their capacities; and utilizing, maintaining, and compensating their services to meet an organizational requirement.

The core of the process is the health and productivity of an entity—firm, ranch, school, whatever. People produce work, which relates to profit, recognition, or reward for the organization. Work is guided by rules and regulations. Workers are paid for their efforts.

People who work with the land generally do not view their work as something defined by a set of rules. It is more a daily search for meaning than cash to buy groceries. The objective of HRM is to get optimum output (profit) for a business or organization. The Uyghur stockman and truck drivers show that people often bend rules to their own self interest.

These conditions can all coexist if workers understand the mission of the organization, think that mission commendable, recognize their role in the organization, and are allowed to use their initiative to do their job. These conditions occur most often where goals are set communally and tasks are completed through inspiration rather than prodding. This model is more akin to a sports team than a business. And the manager is more like a coach than an auditor.

Red Auerbach of the Boston Celtics was one of the most successful coaches ever. His Celtics represented a shared philosophy that victory belongs to the team. Individual honors were acknowledged, but no Celtic was told to go out of his way to achieve them. Under Auerbach, the Celtics never had the league’s top scorer. They won seven league championships without placing even one among the league’s top 10 scorers.

Auerbach said his job was spotting talent and getting the most out of his players. He didn’t focus on individuals except as their contribution to the team. He looked at the “whole package.” While many Celtics were outstanding, they embraced the concept of the role player—a player who willingly undertakes the thankless job that has to be done in order to make the whole package fly.

In the Auerbach model, the human resource manager (coach) helped workers to understand and accept the mission, apply their unique talents to a specific part of the work, and put the gain of the team over individual accomplishment. Fortunately, this fits most land-care workers and Terkel’s findings of worker’s goals. The human resource manager’s (coach, ranch foreman, superintendent, dean, etc.) main job is to enable worker initiative and to assure the mission is a shared vision.

Once a shared vision is understood and accepted, HRM is accomplished by a clear set of instructions that can be followed by everyone on the team. A classic example is what trail boss Jim Flood told green-hand cowboys on their first trail drive (in Andy Adams’ Log of a Cowboy). In March 1882, Flood’s cow crew swam 3,200 Mexican cattle across the Rio Grande near Brownsville, Texas. They delivered 3,312 to the Blackfoot Indian agent in western Montana 5 months later.

Flood said cattle should never know they were under restraint. They should not be driven; just keep something of interest out in front of them—fresh forage, water, movement that piques their curiosity.... The job is to keep them content and constantly moving at their own pace, never aware they are driven.

Flood told each hand to keep his 12 horses healthy and rotate them, lest one go lame or become unridable. Train some for swimming a river. A good swimming horse would keep its rider safe; the success of the herd depended on live cowboys.

The cook was to spare nothing. A well-fed crew was a happy one. Hands must eat well, and have a dry bedroll so they could sleep comfortably when they had a chance. He was honest about hardships. They would face flooded rivers, long waterless stretches, Indian raids, and gunfights. But if they got along as a team, stayed healthy, kept their mounts fresh, and thought first about the herd, they would all—cattle and cowboys—arrive alive and on time.

Jim Flood, Red Auerbach, and most successful leaders in business, government, and academia follow a similar model: know your mission, have a plan, move steadily forward, keep equipment in working readiness, use specialists, stay healthy, work as a team, and care about the job. And they know that the key is the work of individuals who get their rewards from knowing their work is worthwhile.

HRM for a profitable ranch is not a big deal when happy people know what they are doing, know why they are doing it, and take pride in the outcome. It can be a nightmare if emphasis is on profit, people be damned.

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