

## BOOK REVIEW

Nuthall P. L. (2010) *Farm Business Management: The Human Factor*. First Edition. C.A.B. International: pp 216. ISBN 13 978 1 84593 598 6 (hardback), £75.00.

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### Theme

This publication addresses the human factor within the context of farm business management; it focuses on the farmer/farm manager and on understanding the underlying reasons for his/her performance and behaviour.

### Summary

The purpose of this book is well defined by the author in the Introduction, 'to outline the human components of what makes a person, and why a manager acts in particular ways' (Chapter 1; pp. 1). To support this objective the author identifies the components that define management ability, and then moves on to consider the origins of managerial ability, the importance of management style, intelligence and experience, and how an understanding of these and other factors may lead to a determination of how management ability might be improved. Decision processes, the skills required by a manager, and the importance of avoiding bias and coping with stress are comprehensively dealt with before moving on to objectives and how these might be shaped, and importantly, how managerial ability may be improved during the working life of the manager. The text uses case study farmers throughout to illustrate the author's findings, which are based on logical analysis, in order to portray and reinforce the complexity of the reality. At appropriate points he uses the device of introducing two professional consultants, "Bruce" and "Prof", to give their views.

### Review of the contents

The author draws on his experience and knowledge to claim to be able to determine, by analysis and logic, the human components that constitute a manager and his behaviour, and from this to synthesise a programme of managerial improvement which can be implemented by the manager alone, or with aid of a consultant(s). Critical to this theme is the assumption that improvement of a manager's performance, at whatever level, is possible. This is a concept that is already recognised and accepted by many practicing professionals and progressive farm managers: Chapter 8; pp. 186, in particular provides evidence of the value of continuing professional development.

The author is to be applauded for attempting to address a subject of such complexity. The academically rigorous approach displayed does not lose sight of practical reality whilst giving reason to what experienced management consultants and trainers have intuitively applied in the past. This book will no doubt be of value to these groups, but whether or not it will appeal to all farmers/managers other than those who are familiar with the statistical

element, or at least are not put off by it, is open to question.

The inclusion of tests and questionnaires provides useful material and food for thought for the reader as do, for example, the considered importance of managerial and personal attributes and entrepreneurial skills as expressed by farmers and consultants (Tables 5.5, 5.9 and 5.7, Chapter 5; pages 103, 108 and 106). The stated lack of psychometric tests suitable for rural businesses, referred to in Chapter 2; pp.17, constitutes an interesting observation since many would consider that such fundamental tests would hold good across all types of business activities, including agriculture.

While some readers might question the use of simple illustrations, such as those employed in Chapter 4; pp. 83, and Chapter 7; pp. 167, they do serve to ground the reader and, for young aspiring farm managers, should prove a useful transitional exemplar in the progression from their technologically rich experience to the higher elements of management.

The human context within which farmers and managers work is given full recognition, particularly in Chapter 6 on bias and stress and Chapter 7, in relation to objectives and the values held by the farmer and his/her family.

### **Reflections on the use of case studies and the underlying assumption that it is possible to improve management skills (Chapter 1; p. 1)**

It is likely the author gave serious consideration to the possibility of developing the case study approach to encompass (i) the identification of farmers who have deficiencies in some areas of their management expertise, (ii) identification of appropriate consultation/training, and (iii) the evaluation of improvements achieved from this training. Perhaps this could be the basis of a future book, since its inclusion here might have risked over extending a nicely judged, compact volume. But such an extension may not only have reinforced the basic assumption of the book, it might have underlined the value of continuing professional development, which is referred to on a number of occasions in the text. Whether such development is best achieved through informal learning (Chapter 8; pp. 183), by more formal learning, or by a combination of the two is a matter for consideration by the participant - as is recognition of individual's preferred learning style (Chapter 2; pp.42-47).

This book has achieved what the author sought. The insights and guidance it contains, based as they are on sound study and analysis, recommend this book to all aspiring to become better farmers and managers, and for those, such as students, consultants and trainers, wishing to better understand farm managers.

### **About the reviewer**

Richard Turner (FIAGRm) is a former Principal of Hadlow College and a past Chair of the Institute of Agricultural Management's Training, Education and Research Committee. He was the first Lead Tutor in the Hampshire based John Edgar Trust Management Development Scheme, and co-author of *The Farm Business* (1985) 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. A member of the Devon FMA, his particular interests include man management, continuing professional development and mentoring in agriculture.