A practical approach to skills development

Skills development and capacity building has long been put forth as a major requirement for growth in the agricultural industry. Although this seems true on principle, the role that skills development can play in growth has not been clarified enough. And before we have a very clear vision on this matter, there is the danger that skills development will be done merely for the sake of it, and will not be part of the successful grower’s long-term planning.

Before we make an attempt at such a role definition, we need to consider two realities around the process of how skills are developed.

First of all, everybody learns all the time. Although this statement sounds rather obvious, its implications are far reaching. It implies that all growers have an existing skills pool amongst their employees, with skills and knowledge that have been developed and gained mostly through practical experience.

Another important implication of this reality is that the quality of the skills and knowledge of employees is dependent on the agricultural practices on the farm - where good agricultural practices are not applied every day, workers would not have learnt the ‘right’ skills. The breadth and depth of skills and knowledge that have been acquired by workers further depends on the management structure on a farm. If the management structure is such that workers only enjoy limited exposure to certain aspects of the farming operation, they will find it difficult to contextualise their skills and knowledge, and to obtain an understanding of the ‘big picture’.

The second reality of the process in which skills development takes place, is that information does not equal knowledge, and that knowledge does not equal insight. A process is required to ensure that information leads to knowledge and that knowledge leads to insight. Employees that are exposed to certain processes on a farm may obtain the information they require to perform a certain task in the expected manner, but if they are not provided with additional information and if they are not assisted in converting this information to knowledge, they will not be able to contextualise the information. Contextualising information is the basis of gaining knowledge and developing skills that can be applied in situations that they have not been faced with before.

Formal skills development programmes aim to provide learn-

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**Tackling a zero detectable pesticide residue approach**

Legislative process and its implications for third countries exporting to the EU, were generally more pragmatic in dealing with pesticide risk management. These retailers tended also to be more willing to listen and to cooperate to reduce the risk of a pesticide non-conformance for mutual benefit.

**A CREDIBLE FOOD SAFETY RISK MANAGEMENT MODEL**

Many retailers acknowledged the proactive approach by the southern African citrus industry to manage their own food safety risk through the compilation and distribution of the Recommended Usage Restrictions For Plant Protection Products On Southern African Citrus. This is a quarterly (sometimes more frequent) publication reflecting the most recent MRL changes in key markets, along with appropriate usage restrictions that help growers to meet the MRL targets. The Recommended Usage Restrictions For Plant Protection Products On Southern African Citrus (RUR) is the sum of close monitoring of the EU MRLs, plus the findings of residue breakdown research by the CRI group, over the last 15 years. The latest version is available on the CGA website (www.cga.co.za).

Backed up by credible science, and in line with the legal MRL principles and policies of major trading partners, the RUR is firstly defendable before consumers - it meets all the food safety and legal requirements - and secondly, is less prescriptive on what growers can and cannot use to manage pests and diseases in their own situation. It reduces the risk of a non-conformance and addresses many of the concerns highlighted by retailers as reasons for employing a zero detectable residue policy.

As a model to promote sustainable and responsible agriculture that also offers retailers the appropriate assurances (‘all reasonable steps to ensure food is suitable for human consumption have been taken’) this approach by growers was well received by retailers. It also ‘fits’ with commercial accreditation schemes already in place. For example, Tesco have worked closely with the CGA-CRI in their latest version of the RAG Plant Protection Products List (PPPL) and by taking into account the appropriate usage restrictions catered for in the RUR, the final draft now reflects a far more pragmatic approach than was evident in the earlier versions.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Essentially UK retailers are seeking ways to reduce their exposure to reduced sales resulting from a Food Safety incident, particularly around pesticide excedances, as they perceive this to be their greatest risk. The current strategy of some is to aim for zero detectable residues over the next 8-15 years, effectively precluding the future usage of PPPs.

As a practical alternative used in the southern African Citrus industry, the compilation of the Recommended Usage Restrictions For Plant Protection Products On Southern African Citrus, can scientifically provide consumers and retailers with the appropriate level of assurance while optimising the number of instruments/tools to manage pests and disease according to Good Agricultural Practices. This approach needs to be further promoted among UK retailers. Ongoing and more frequent interaction between CGA-CRI, retailers and consumer groups is necessary to remain in touch with their current thinking on food safety issues.

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ers with new skills and knowledge, and with a
wider context for the skills and knowledge that
they already have. It also aims to ensure that the
skills and knowledge that the learner gains are in
line with best farming practices.

The purpose of skills development must
furthermore be clearly defined. It can be said to
be three-fold, being to maintain the current skills pool, to extend
the skills pool, and to extend the skills range. This is true not only
on an industry level, but also on a farm level. The grower must
first of all look at his current skills pool and develop a plan of
maintaining their skills. This implies the need for ensuring that
skills remain current and in line with the latest developments in
agricultural practices.

Secondly, the grower must look at the ways in which the skills
of his employees can be extended and further developed. This
process should be in concert with the human resource management
of the operation. If an analysis is done of all the various positions
on the farm, and a job description is developed for each position,
the current skills of those employed in those positions can be com-
pared with the required skills as per the job
description. The first step would be to ensure that
the employees have the necessary skills for their
current positions. Consequently, an analysis can
be made of the promotion opportunities that
employees have within the operation. The grower
can then ensure that the employee obtains the
necessary skills, knowledge and experience before being promoted
to a higher position.

Thirdly, extending the skills range of employees implies the
introduction of new skills areas. Employees that have been involved
in specific areas of the farming operation can be exposed to other
areas through skills development programmes.

Let us now attempt to define the role of skills development
and capacity building in a citrus farming operation: If planned
and implemented properly, skills development and capacity build-
ing can make an important contribution to the competitive advant-
age of a farming operation. Proper planning and implementation
requires that the grower views skills development as part of the
operational management function of the farm.