While every chapter in this book can be used as a reference for policy formulation, in this chapter we provide a conceptual framework for thinking about policies. An outline of possible topics to include in a personnel handbook is provided. Not everything that goes in a handbook is a policy, such as the inclusion of a “Historical Statement.” Farm employers are urged to be cautious in the creation of policies.

Often, even simple problems have many alternative solutions. One such policy area, sick leave benefits, is discussed for illustration purposes.

DEVELOPING POLICIES

In general, policies are guidelines to decision making—once in place, each decision does not have to be made anew from scratch. Policies reflect a com-

“Sierra Gold Nurseries takes accident prevention and safety enforcement very seriously. We have a strong and comprehensive Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP), and consider it an important Nursery objective to prevent employee accidents wherever possible. We firmly believe that all nursery jobs can be performed safely and efficiently. Unfortunately, accidents may still happen. Should you have an accident, even a minor one, or become ill at work, notify your supervisor immediately.”

Sierra Gold Nursery Personnel Handbook
Yuba City, California
pany’s value system. The tone and language of policy statements will be taken as reflections of management attitudes toward employees. Personnel policies also outline expected worker conduct.

Most personnel decisions can be guided by policy determinations. Should all workers be given a practical test before being selected? Should employees be paid at the going rate, a cut above, or a cut below?

Supervisors may vary in their management approach. While distinct styles can serve different managers well, at some point inconsistency may have a negative effect on worker morale. Policies establish uniformity. Well designed policies help reduce the incidence of inequities and give employees the reasoning behind what may otherwise look like favoritism.

With some notable exceptions, my preference would be to develop policies as a guide to supervisorial action. Accordingly, I feel most policies can be included in a supervisors’ handbook. Despite this preference, there are some policies that need to be provided up-front to employees as a potential legal defense. Consult with your attorney on such a list of “required” policies. For example, farmers who have not developed a policy against sexual harassment may share liability for wrongdoing committed by their employees. Other policies that need to be distributed to the employees may include those related to workplace violence, housing (if it is provided), and the establishment of a drug-free workplace. Having policies consistent with government regulations helps to ensure farm employers operate legitimately and avoid the penalties associated with violations.

Written policies in an employee handbook may also promote good public relations in representing the farm enterprise to local residents, banks, courts, and prospective employees. Statements made in a handbook, however, are often equivalent to an employee contract and deserve thorough analysis before implementation. Farmers who construct policies without sufficient deliberation may later regret their guidelines.

The formulation of personnel policies is influenced by past and prevailing practices, present challenges, management styles, and employee needs and preferences. The active participation of key managers, supervisors, and workers, and a final review by an attorney and a labor management specialist will generally make personnel policies better and more effective.
of key managers, supervisors, and workers, and a final review by an attorney and a labor management specialist will generally make personnel policies better and more effective. Sample policies from other employers and commercial computer software packages can be useful references.

To be effective, policies need to be well-communicated. Written policies, in employee handbooks, are a strong defense against complaints of ignorance. Handbooks should be well-organized and readable, and when length justifies it, contain a good index. Even so, when used alone, an employee handbook is impersonal and unlikely to be read. Meetings provide management a chance to encourage and answer questions. The orientation period is a natural time to tell new employees about policies.

Once communicated, policies may do more harm than good if ignored. Policies are reinforced when the employer follows them herself. Reasonable exceptions need not subvert policy if they are kept to a minimum and explained when they occur. Frequent exceptions may reflect a need for explicit policy change. It is much easier to review and update policies periodically than to operate either in violation or without them entirely. To be effective, policies need to be adjusted to meet the changing needs of the organization.

**Historical Statement**

If you have a history you are proud of, why not share it with your employees and, indirectly, with the community? Knowing about the ranch they work for helps workers identify with the operation and gives them an early sense of belonging. A historical statement in an employee handbook is also a good place to tell workers more about the commodities or produce you grow or produce (see Sidebar 17–1).

The image your farm projects can affect employees even when they are home or with friends outside of work. When making new acquaintances, most people mention their job and place of employment. The information in a handbook’s historical section reaches employee family members and friends.

**Paid Sick Leave**

In developing policies in any area of human resource management, farm managers have a number of choices to make. Here, we will consider paid sick leave as an example of the many options available to farmers, even in areas that appear straightforward. In regard to sick leave, let us consider (1) what it is and why it is provided; (2) how it is accrued; (3) how it may be used; (4) what unintended effects it may have; and (5) how to control abuses of it.
Purpose of sick leave. Sick leave is usually an optional benefit provided by employers. Employees are paid for days not worked due to illness or injury of a nonindustrial nature. (Workers’ Compensation insurance procedures normally dictate the compensation and treatment of industrial injuries and illness.) Farmers provide paid sick leave to protect workers from losing pay. In a study of more than fifteen hundred workers, sick leave was the second most important fringe benefit received by employees. Only health insurance was more important.

Accrual. You determine how many hours of sick leave workers can accrue per month. Some employers use the “use-it-or-lose-it” approach. They do this by either limiting the number of earned sick leave days employees can carry over from year to year, or by eliminating pay for days not taken before job termination.

Allowable use of benefit. Farmers need to determine the legitimate use of sick leave. Will it be used only for the illness of the worker or will it include family sick leave, bereavement, or participation in “wellness-oriented” fitness or sport programs? In some cases, it is even provided for “mental health days” taken whenever an employee feels overly stressed by work or life’s pressures.

Employers who allow for paid mental health days or time off to participate in a fitness program are thinking of the long-term health of their work force. Others feel vacation rather than sick leave should be used for such purposes, and in some cases call it “personal time off” to underscore its purpose. Employers who allow workers to use sick leave for family sickness, bereavement, or other alternate uses may limit the number of days that can be so charged.

Misuse. If workers take sick leave only when they are truly ill, the “use-it-or-lose-it” method works relatively well. It may, however, tend to reward workers
who are sick over those who do not miss work. Some healthy workers may take days off simply not to lose them. While the original intent for sick leave was to provide increased pay security for employees, in practice it has often turned into extra days of personal time off.

When misused, sick leave can translate into company-sponsored absenteeism. There are costs of finding and training a replacement who may function at a less productive level for a time. Workers who know fellow employees are abusing the system often become resentful, or decide to join them.

_Diminishing misuse_. An employer may attempt to thwart the use of sick leave for an occasional “day off” by disallowing pay for any sick leave of less than two or three consecutive days. This may force employees into staying home to more fully recover when they have been ill. Others may require a doctor’s note verifying the worker’s illness, even for one-day absences. Many physicians, however, will readily approve absences.

For longer absences (a week or longer), it may be a good idea for a policy requiring a medical excuse.

Some of the traditional approaches used in preventing sick leave abuse become less necessary when incentives are given to be on the job. Farm employers may prefer to provide “well pay” rather than “sick leave.” Farmers concerned mainly with covering workers for short-term illness may prefer to provide added vacation days in lieu of paid sick leave. Some workers are more likely to be sick on the employer’s time than on their own.⁴

Along with the idea of paying employees for being well, rather than sick, employers can establish a system whereby they pay workers for unused sick leave days upon their quitting, retiring or being terminated. This will benefit everyone, as employees will then accumulate a large number of days over the years, which can come in handy if there is a catastrophic illness or injury that keeps an employee away for a long period of time.

A variation of the alternative above, is to require workers to accumulate and maintain a minimum balance of unused sick leave days (e.g., four to eight weeks). After this period an employee could opt to either receive the added benefit immediately in terms of cash or personal time off, or when he separates from the job.

The idea is to underscore that these days are given to reward good attendance. One caution, however, would be not to make the incentive to come to work so high, that employees would come when everyone’s needs would be better served had they stayed home.

**SUMMARY**

Policies help guide decisions. While individual supervisory style should not be stifled, inconsistency in approach in some areas may have negative effects on worker morale. Policies can be a fine tool in reducing perceptions of arbitrary treatment of employees. To obtain maximum value, policies need to be understood by both supervisors and workers. Policies can be shared with employees during the orientation period, through meetings, and through handbooks.

To be effective, policies need to be adjusted to meet the changing needs of the organization. Policies constructed without sufficient deliberation may be regretted later. Sick leave is one policy area discussed in this chapter to provide an example of the numerous alternatives that can affect employees and the organization. Sick leave policies can be designed to protect workers from losing income when sick while also rewarding individuals who do not misuse the privilege. Carefully crafted policies, then, can help farmers act based on a concern for both production and personnel.
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Sidebar 17–2 (continued)

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VIII. Index

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