How to get teams to solve their own problems

Why should I use my team to solve problems?

Problem solving is a key activity on all farms and can be very time-consuming if you are the “go-to” person when things go wrong.

There is great value in using the combined skills, knowledge and perspectives of your team – the chances are the more heads are involved, the better the solution will be.

If you create the right expectations and atmosphere for your team to solve their own problems it will save you time and benefit the team members as well, by developing their skills and knowledge.

How can I get teams to solve their own problems?

Start by letting the team know that you expect them to work together to solve problems and that your role is to provide support, advice and feedback when required. Set a clear expectation that you don’t want them to come to you just with problems but also with solutions.

Then give them the tools to do this. Use a team meeting to discuss a systematic process they can use for problem-solving.

Here are some steps they could follow:

- Define the problem. It is important that everyone understands what the actual problem is, as sometimes it is not obvious or it can be more complex than it seems.
- Collect data. This involves collecting all the facts, such as when the problem first appeared, how often it happens and what has been done about it in the past or in other situations.
- Generate ideas. This is where the power of a team comes into its own. At this stage it is important to brainstorm, a process where quantity is more important than quality, as a left field idea will often spark a very sound idea. All ideas are good at this stage. Your team members need to focus on communicating their ideas clearly and listening carefully to each other without judging.
- Build on ideas. Sift through all the brainstorm ideas and develop possible solutions further.
- Test ideas. At this stage there should only be a few feasible solutions, and these could be tried out, or talked through with management, or other experts. This will guide the final decision on solution(s).
- Implement the solution. Draw up a plan to implement the solution and then go ahead and do it.
- Evaluate the solution. It is very important to observe the impact of the solution, to ensure it has fixed the problem and not created some other unintended problem. For future reference, it is really useful to write a brief report at this stage covering all the steps above.

What will make it work?

Problem solving in teams is a skill that can be learnt, so you will need to provide guidance in the early stages. You will also need to be patient as your team learns how to do it and becomes more confident in the process and in their ability.

The key to making it work is in the way you communicate your trust in the ability of the team and your commitment to making it work.