Hamish and Natalie Davidson had a crash course in staff management when they took on a 2200 cow conversion in Canterbury in 2006 — a year when staff were hard to find and the region had a devastating snow storm.

“When I arrived in March/April the new conversion was in its infancy and we had no experience in Canterbury. We had a whole lot of staff to find, we had a farm to convert and we went from there,” says Hamish.

The Davidsons moved down from the Manawatu where Hamish had sharemilked 220 cows and Natalie managed 400 cows on another farm. They wanted to try their hand at large scale farming so they bought into an equity partnership with Spectrum Group in Canterbury.

“We had always done a reasonably good job of staff management up north, but this was at a different level so we pulled out the DairyNZ HR Toolkit,” says Hamish.

Natalie adds, “When we knew we were going to come down we spent a lot of time getting our systems right for how we were going to find staff, how we were going to recruit them, and how we were going to orientate them, so we could hit the ground running."

“We knew we were potentially in over our heads and we needed to be bloody well organised, otherwise we were going to fail.”

Despite doing their homework, the Davidsons weren’t prepared for just how hard their first year in the south would be.
In March, they advertised for two farm managers capable of running the property under their supervision. While they knew this wasn’t an ideal time to find farm staff, they hoped they’d get at least 30 replies. But there were only six.

“We picked up two guys from Southland. One was a South African guy who’d been in New Zealand for a year but had prior people skills, plus an Argentinean guy who was working on a reasonable-sized farm who had really good animal husbandry skills.”

Two Kiwi career-changers from town were recruited along with eight internationals, including four Filipinos “straight off the plane”, to make up the junior staff.

“We had a pretty mixed and matched team – and on June 12 we had all these people living in Portacons and we had a metre and a half of snow around for three weeks. It was pretty stressful!” Hamish says.

“We had a five bedroom house and staff living with us, which wasn’t ideal but was just what you did, and we had five houses on the go and a cowshed on the go and that got held up for a month.”

Natalie says it was a baptism by fire. “We got through it somehow – I don’t know quite how!”

Despite all the difficulties, the Davidsons held on to their hastily assembled team for the season and they were able to get turnover to a minimum in succeeding seasons. Natalie says the homework on processes and policies paid off.

“People want to know what the expectations are; they want to know when they turn up for work what their jobs are going to be for the day. Most personalities don’t want to turn up to the dairy and go, ‘Right, am I cows, am I washing the plant?’

“They want to know it’s unbiased, so we’ve always broken up all the farm jobs into different roles and every team member rotates around those roles. It’s on a roster so it’s non-personality specific. If it’s raining that day or something crappy falls on that day, you know you haven’t been put there because of you, it’s on the roster.”

For future recruitment, the Davidsons were careful to employ staff who could fit in with – and not disrupt – their large team. Dominating, difficult personalities were to be avoided.

They developed a buddy system under which new staff were trained by experienced hands and progressively introduced to all farm jobs. With eight staff, normally four were ‘seniorish’ and four were ‘juniorish’.

Within the roster there was a work allocation roster. “Our SS (super staff) system we called it, buddies had the same days off and the roles changed all the time. The SS system helped them get into the team quickly and settled.”

“The new employees had built the relationship with us through the whole employment process and through the orientation and all the paper work that you do, but then they need to morph and build their relationships within the team they’re working with.”

What can I do?

Here are some things you can do if you want to develop good systems and develop yourself as well:

- Use the DairyNZ HR Toolkit to help you develop your business systems. It takes time, but do it gradually and it will pay off in the long run, even on a small farm.

- Make sure staff rosters are set well in advance, everyone knows what they are and they are fair. Rotating tasks makes sure everyone gets a good mix of jobs as well as developing their skills and knowledge.

- Every so often, take the time to ask yourself if you are satisfied with the work you are doing. If not, make a plan to achieve your true goals.
After six years, the Davidsons had had enough of large herds and multiple staff and were ready for a change.

“We left because we were looking for a new challenge, our values weren’t in alignment anymore with where the farm business was heading, and Hamish was burnt out,” says Natalie. “Hame was sick of being a fire-fighter – he wanted to put up fences and get cows in, and get back to day-to-day farming.”

They’re now equity partners and farm managers of a new conversion near Methven, milking 520 cows. With a high level of automation, the farm needs three full time equivalents.

Hamish is happy being back in touch with the cows and Natalie has been working off-farm (for DairyNZ) on a contract basis. They don’t miss the large herd operation but don’t regret their time there.

“We got into some good habits working with a corporate and we’ve carried on a lot of those good habits around reporting and documenting systems. We’re still working through some of that but our aim is to have those systems here,” says Hamish.

“The hardest thing in any operation is getting people to understand what our expectations are and what the business goals and aspirations are. Once they do, it makes the running of the farm and the business really simple.”

The staff perspective

When Abi Rackham took a job calf rearing to fill in until she started her nursing degree, she had no plans to work full time in the dairy industry but four seasons later she’s 2IC on Hamish and Natalie Davidson’s 500 cow farm near Methven.

“I looked in the paper and saw a calf rearing job with them,” says Abi. “I got that and I liked it and I did a little bit of milking in the meantime and I decided I liked that too and then I started doing more stuff on-farm and liked it even more and then I started going to AgITO classes and that’s how it happened really.”

When she started with the Davidsons, they were still on the 1600 cow property but when they moved to their new conversion, they invited Abi to come too.

“Who wants to be in the shed 24/7? That’s why I couldn’t see myself staying long term on a 1600 cow farm because a lot of the time that’s what you do because it’s what’s needed. And on a 1600 cow farm there are eight staff whereas where we are now there are only three staff and 500 cows. You do a lot more roles on the farm.”

Abi says she had less contact with Hamish when he was managing a large herd and more staff but on the new farm she can work alongside the boss.

“Now if he makes decisions I actually get involved, I’m actually part of the discussion,” she says. “I’ve got ideas and I want them to be heard and I want them to be used – otherwise, why do you do it, why do you learn from someone just to be told what to do every day?”

Although Hamish talks to the staff nearly every day, the Davidsons also do a formal performance review every three or four months. “That’s because they want to help me progress, they want to help me know what I want – they actually force me to think about it, otherwise I don’t,” says Abi.

“I know there’s a lot of bosses out there - I’ve got friends working on dairy farms - and they don’t have such procedures but I think it’s important. Otherwise you do just drift.”