Scott Levings’ experience managing staff at a urea plant in Taranaki has proved valuable in his new role as manager of three staff and 630 cows on a Central Otago dairy farm.

“A lot of it is directly transferable,” Scott says. “People are people and they have the same annoyances. If you can avoid those and promote what they’re interested in, it works for everybody.”

When Scott and wife Kate moved from Taranaki to manage Kate’s parents’ 204 ha farm in Ettrick, Scott’s dairy farming experience was limited to milking cows as a teenager. But he was used to supervising staff.

“When I was at the urea plant, I’d had a fair bit of experience doing performance reviews so I knew how it worked,” he says.

“Rather than a performance review, we probably do it more as objective setting. We ask them what do you want to achieve in the next six months and what do we want you to achieve in the next six months?”

Soon after arriving in Central Otago, Scott worked with human resources consultant Robin Paul to draw up position descriptions for the farm. “It gave us something to actually measure performance reviews back against because otherwise it’s like, you do a performance review but if you haven’t got a position description to tailor it back to, well everybody’s flying a bit blind.”

The various jobs around the farm are broken into four main sections – people (Scott’s responsibility), the farm, animals and equipment.

“When we looked at it, we largely had someone doing each one of those roles,” says Scott. “We had a discussion with them and said, ‘this is where we think it’s heading, do you guys see it as that?’ Pretty
easily things fell under one of those umbrellas. They are responsible for making sure it happens, but not necessarily doing it because there’s other staff and they’re not here every day.”

Scott confesses he sometimes runs a bit behind with performance reviews but nevertheless he makes sure he always has a good handle on what’s happening with his staff.

“I guess one of the things that has largely reduced the priority on it is the fact that every week we have a formal team meeting and Pam, who does all the office work now, types it up as we go.

“It’s emailed out to everybody so we have a hard copy in the office, I have one in my diary and (owners) Grant and Gaynor can see what’s happening here without being here really.”

Scott says keeping communication lines open is one of the most important parts of keeping the business smoothly ticking over. The weekly meetings mean he can tell the story once, instead of three or four times over.

“When we didn’t do them, you might have a discussion with two of them but the third person might be away doing something so you have a catch-up to tell them but, because they’re in the middle of doing something, you forget to tell them something.

“The meeting brings new opportunities too – quite often one of the things we look at is industry focus, so I can pick anything we like and just try and wise them up. Sometimes guys will ask about something so I’ll make an effort to try to find out for the next week,” says Scott.

“Everybody knows where they’re at and if anyone’s got a gripe, they can air it there. While it’s all pretty relaxed, it’s also formal. If you’ve got a problem, now’s your opportunity. Don’t sit on it and then whinge that nothing’s been done about it.”

Scott has kept staff turnover low. One of the ways he keeps staff motivated is by offering them training. “Anyone we have here who we think is capable, we won’t force them into training but we promote it pretty hard.”

Scott and Pam, who does the farm’s office work, have put together a manual for policy and procedures for most aspects of the farm operation.

“I had a list of about 40 items I wanted written up and Pam’s got in and made a lot of that happen,” says Scott. “For example, now we’ve got procedures around all the irrigation stuff including maintenance, and if we have a power trip, this is how we go through to reset.

“There’s a fair bit of cost in equipment around the place now and it gives you some reassurance that if something happens and we’re not on-farm, the guys can make it happen.

“If everyone’s reading off the same page it makes it a whole lot easier. You haven’t got two people at cross purposes who both think they’re doing the right thing.”

What can I do?

Here are some things you can do if you want to run your farm in a more business-like way:

- Develop clear position descriptions for every job on the farm and develop a performance review process which uses the position description as a sound base to start from.
- Have regular meetings that aim to both give out and collect information, and send out notes from the meetings to everyone on the farm. The notes can also be put up in a place where everybody can see them.
- Make a list of all the tasks on the farm and gradually build up a set of procedures for each one. It’ll make everyone’s jobs, including your own, easier.
The staff perspective:

Chris Bardsley has no regrets about giving up shearing and taking a job on the Central Otago dairy farm managed by Scott Levings.

“I’d been shearing for ten years and just decided me and my wife, we wanted a change,” Bardsley says. “The cows coming on the platform the first time, I was wondering if they were going to come straight on and come for me, sort of thing, but I was reassured pretty quickly it wasn’t going to be that bad at all.”

Now at the end of his second season, Bardsley has progressed to herd manager/2IC. “It’s good because you’re never doing the same thing every day and you’re always experiencing and learning different things every day as well. That’s a big thing for someone like me, especially when you want to progress.”

Bardsley says the management system on the farm works well and everyone knows what they’re up to and all the jobs get done. “It’s basically a team effort.”

He says the weekly staff meetings are valuable. “It’s a good catch-up with everything that happens during the week and what’s going to happen during the next week, what’s happening on-farm. It’s really good; everybody knows where we’re at.”

For ten years Bardsley moved from shearing shed to shearing shed, mostly around Otago but also in Australia.

“I do remember when I was shearing, thinking, ‘what are those fellas in that shed over there doing getting shit on by cows and stuff’. I never thought I’d end up doing it but it’s a totally different career compared to shearing. You can start at the bottom with dairy farming and work your way up to where you want to be.”

And now Bardsley’s keen to climb the career ladder and is looking for a job with more responsibility. “It’s just time to move on. There’s no problem here, I can’t ask for anymore from Grant or Scott, they’ve been excellent,” he says.