

## Giving credit where it's due

THE Co-operative Group launched a survey of all its employees six years ago. It's called the Talkback survey.

Results are reported down to a business unit, provided there is a minimum of five responses to protect anonymity. The questions cover topics from whether the employee understands their business goals, if they have an annual appraisal (and if it's any good), to how they feel about pay, work-life balance and conditions at work.

As a manager I want to get a high response rate, to make sure the scores are representative.

By allocating time to complete the surveys in our potato packhouses (and translating them into other languages), we hit a 90 per cent response rate last year for The Co-operative Farms' 200+ employees.

The main outcome we have targeted is 'employee engagement': this is calculated from specific questions in the survey to measure how committed and motivated people are to do their best at work every day.

There is a good correlation between 'engaged' employees and business performance. It makes sense that people who want to work for you will go the extra mile when they can see how things could be done better.

The Farm's business compares relatively poorly to the rest of The Co-operative Group (mainly retailing) on work-life balance and, more irritatingly



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for me, in thanking people when they make a special effort.

The latter may be cultural in farming, but we do appear to be reluctant to thank people when it is deserved.

But our engagement score is one of the highest in the Co-Op. We have improved every year since the survey started, by tackling the worst scores.

One of the most successful actions we took was to address a low score against the Talkback survey 'making a difference where I work'. We set aside a budget for all units to spend on

improving working conditions, chosen by the local employees.

As a result, we have improved the canteens at the potato packhouses, bought better outdoor clothing on the apple farm and changed work overalls to the best on the market.

Where possible we have put up a plaque to say it was paid for from the 'Talkback fund'. This led to a 40 per cent improvement in the score.

Another direct outcome of the survey is the effort we put into doing annual appraisals and setting objectives for the year ahead. I believe objectives must have an element of challenge in them, which makes it all the more rewarding when we have achieved them.

One objective I have set for this year is to improve our score on thanking people who have put in an extra effort.

And to all Co-operative Farm employees reading this article, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them once again for all the work they have done this winter, for making their way into work whatever the weather and getting the job done despite the bitter cold. Well done.

■ *Christine Tacón is general manager of the 24,291-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. She was awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004 and, among other industry roles, was a Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group member.*