

Ann Nuku

Ann Nuku's personal development as she progressed into meat industry management was 'largely self-driven' but strongly supported by her company.

That has worked well for Ann, who has been Plant Manager at AFFCO's Manawatu plant in Feilding for the past 13 years. She welcomes the structured training and development programmes provided in the sector today.

Born and bred in Palmerston North, Ann began her career in the sector in the plant's lab. She graduated through technical manager and a North Island-wide position as quality systems manager and then production manager for Manawatu – with a three year break with her children in the mid-1990s.

Along the way, she has undertaken a wide range of management and leadership training, through providers including Massey University, Business Central, the Employers and Manufacturers Association and business consultancies.

"For me, it was more of a case of me asking if I could do a particular paper or course or training programme and my employers saying 'yes, that's a good idea,' she says. "I'd submit the request and it would be approved.

"The meat industry is one of the most genuine and inclusive work environments that I have experienced. There are no warm fuzzies for the sake of it, just to satisfy some sort of new management fad. The people, from senior management down, are genuine and caring and I could write a book of anecdotes about all the amazing people that have supported me along the way, across all sections of the business."

That support includes those she has mentored, as well as her own managers.

"Some of the people who have supported and influenced me the most have been the people that I have managed. It is certainly one of the main sources of satisfaction in my role that I have the opportunity to coach and support the next generation of supervisors and managers coming through.

"Nowadays, we have a much more structured development programme. For instance, through AFFCO's cadet system. We like to 'grow our own' talent and we recognise employees who have good aptitude, attendance rate and attitude. People with these attributes are encouraged to apply to our cadet training programme.

"Training is also much more accessible. For instance, Massey's Meat Technology Diploma course has been revitalised. It used to be quite tricky for people to get away to do it but now a lot is online, with block courses, which is working much better."

Ann says that the programme is bringing through as many talented women future leaders as men – and that she has never encountered any barriers to women progressing in the sector.

"I have never felt that I have been disadvantaged or advantaged because I am a woman. What is recognised is hard work and loyalty."

During Ann's time as plant manager, the Feilding plant has enjoyed a significant increase in the number of cattle processed, resulting in staff numbers growing threefold. The plant now operates day shifts for 11-12 months of the year and night shifts for eight to 11 months. There has also been significant investment in new technology.

While she says that the 'every day is different' aspect of the work keeps her job fresh and exciting, she is frank about the challenges too.

"On the flip side, it is not an easy industry to work in. It's fickle and subject to frequent changes in supply and demand, with small margins, and relies on a strong team culture to survive and succeed."

While she does not face the recruitment challenges experienced by many other plant managers across the sector, Ann sees absenteeism as one of the biggest challenges facing the wider industry.

"We aren't the only plant in the region but we are in a good catchment area and have staff commuting from Foxton, the Wairarapa and Whanganui," she says. "We work with WINZ to fill roles and also have the resource of students from Massey, which is very helpful for night shifts and for casual and peak season staff."

"But there is the same challenge across the sector, not everyone comes to work every day - so we share that problem of absenteeism."

The plant works to address this through a number of health programmes – alongside the company's wider wellbeing policies. There is an onsite shop for staff selling meat and also Talley's products at good prices, to promote healthy diet and help with grocery bills. There is no onsite staff canteen selling food -- but soup, porridge, tea , coffee and fruit are provided free to workers .

"That is a basic, " says Ann. "It's for everyone, but we do have a lot of young people on the night shift and young men in particular are not good at packing 'lunches' for themselves."

The sector has constant positive change, significant innovation, new technology advances and no day is ever the same, she says.

"There's also a lot of scope to be involved in industry-related projects, both internal and external – these are the great attractions of this work for me."

"As an industry, we have to make sure we continue to do a very good job in ensuring ours is a very good product. But we also have to do things a bit differently and show clearly that we are socially and environmentally responsible because that is what our customers are asking about now."

"They want to know how you are looking after your staff and how you are treating the animals; all these things are important parts of markets now. That is a very exciting space to be working in, because it is about selling the whole picture, not just the product."

She also sees strong connections between plants and rural communities and between the sector and the wider community as important to the future of the industry.

"Local economies are strongly supported by their meat plants and the industry as a whole is a key part of New Zealand's healthy economy. Feilding is very farm-focussed. We have the farmers' market and one of the biggest stock sale yards in the country , and we have a very strong association with the community. A number of our employees are also local farmers."

"It's also important to promote more widespread understanding and knowledge of the sector, particularly among young people."

"We're in a fortunate position here in that when the plant was rebuilt in 1992, a viewing gallery was included. As well as customers, we have foreign government visits and farmer groups and we also

bring quite a few school groups through. I've been surprised at how little many young people know about the industry and the important role it plays in the New Zealand economy, or even much about where their food comes from.

"It has been lost somewhere along the education process. I feel very glad that, because of our position and viewing gallery set-up, we can play a role in raising that awareness."

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