

Leadership the key to Bonnievale's success

by Reg Weiss

The Japanese have a revolutionary international programme for improving factory productivity called "The 20 Keys" or "Practical Programme of Revolution in Factories and other Organisations to Increase Productivity". The ultimate key to its success, however, lies in enthusiastic leadership and management. These are probably the most distinguishing characteristic of Hansie Wolfaardt, recently appointed joint manager of both the Bonnievale and Ladismith cheese factories, operated by Parmalat SA.

A past national president of the SA Society for Dairy Technology, it was this committed management that ensured a "20 Keys" bronze award for Bonnievale plant some years ago and secured European Union approval for Wolfaardt's plant in 2002, the only dairy factory in the country to achieve this. His was also the first South African dairy factory to comply with the SABS ISO 9002 accreditation in 2003.

If you ask Wolfaardt what his guiding philosophy is he will tell you: "Do it right the first time. Your superior is always going to assume that it was your best effort, no matter how many other pressures you were facing, so do your best at all times".

He is a great believer in mind power and says that if one wants to achieve a goal, one has to undergo a sort of self-imposed brain-washing in which you not only visualise your objective, but tell yourself several times a day what it is that you are going to achieve. Like Napoleon, he believes that with the right attitude most things are possible.

His vision for his dairy factory is that it should become the best dairy factory in the world. It is already recognised by Parmalat as its flagship

factory and has been a powerful contributor towards the accolade recently accorded to Parmalat SA as the international group's most successful performer.

Bonnievale's production achievements are confidential but staggering. Between 2000-2004, productivity was increased by an incredible 43%, processing costs fell by 28% and fixed overheads by 31%. Shipping and warehousing costs decreased by 67%, energy (electricity and coal) by 20% and water usage by 36%. The latest figures show that productivity increased even more in 2004-2005.

Bonnievale was the 26th plant in the world to achieve the "20 Keys" bronze award some years ago, but Wolfaardt already has his eye on the "silver award", demanding even more dedicated and sustainable management principles. The almost impossible goal is to triple productivity.

Wolfaardt says: "There have been only seven silver awards in the world thus far, but one has to aim high if one wants to succeed. Possibly we can have a shot at it next year. We have already met with our staff and the consultants from ODI (Organisation Development International (Pty) Ltd.) decided to do an audit to see whether we are still on target."

Wolfaardt believes that progress in productivity and cost-saving is not only good for the company but benefits the entire dairy industry. Consumers demand the best value for their money and suppliers know they are dealing with a responsible organisation that will not burden the industry with its own inefficiency. The milk producers, he says, are also in business and know that if they deliver a product of the right quality and purity they will have a more secure future and should be able to negotiate mutually satisfactory contracts.



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He further believes that today there is better communication between producers and processors than in the old days when milk was still delivered in cans, uncooled, but straight from the farm. One can say that in the past the milk was more contaminated, although it was fresh when it reached the factories.

When he started, the co-operative was small. There were only five cheese-making vats at the factory, each holding 5 000 litres of milk. Today the Bonnievale plant is huge and can be seen as the biggest single cheese factory in Africa. Total production is a secret, but it has some of the most modern equipment in the industry.

The old co-operative was obliged to keep its farmer shareholders happy, but they did not always have a realistic grasp of the market forces impacting on farm prices. Today, the company has a no less arduous task to keep both suppliers and shareholders happy. With raw material of the right quality at a competitive price and with attractive products at a price the consumer is prepared to pay, it is a delicate balancing act.

Born in Robertson, Wolfaardt grew up on a farm near Bonnievale where he was destined to follow in his father's footsteps. Sent to Oakdale Agricultural School at Riversdale, he responded in his matric-year to an advertisement for an apprentice cheese maker at the Boesmansrivier Co-operative.

He believed he would be able to farm in his spare time. But, a fascination with cheese-making led to a diploma in dairy technology at the Glen College of Agriculture in 1976 and an extra-mural BCom from Unisa in 1980, while working at the factory.

He was soon promoted to head cheese maker and eventually production manager. His interest in management persuaded him to obtain an MBA through the University of Stellenbosch in 1994.

Starting at the bottom helped Wolfaardt to accumulate a wealth of practical experience that has enabled him to unlock the latent potential in others less fortunate than himself. He is by nature



The cheese factory at Bonnievale, flagship of Parmalat SA, has shown remarkable advances in productivity and cost savings. Hansie Wolfaardt, manager of both Bonnievale and Ladismith, is presently considering entering the Bonnievale factory for the coveted "20 Keys" silver award, thus far achieved by only seven factories internationally. Bonnievale won the bronze award a few years ago



Hansie Wolfaardt, joint manager of Bonnievale and Ladismith

a very energetic person who leads by example – often in the office at seven with an 11-hour stint in front of him, yet he enjoys life to the full. He is a licensed pilot, and has competed three times in the Comrades marathon and has also competed successfully in the Bergriver Canoe Marathon.

But, it was in his chosen profession that he earned the coveted SA Society of Dairy Technology Award of Merit for 2003. Dairying is his life, he says, and he would choose it again if he had to start all over today. **M&JR**