



# KNOWING TO GROW

## INCREASING THE RESILIENCE OF PLANT-CENTRED FOOD PRODUCTION SKILLS

### Case Study: Building and owning as a team *Riverford Organic Farmers*

#### BUSINESS PROFILE

Wash Farm is the original and largest farm within Riverford Organic Farmers. It includes approximately 140 acres of field and protected crops, all destined for the box delivery scheme which reaches at least 90,000 homes each week. Nearby is the Riverford restaurant, pack house, and centre of operations. The farm has other sites in Peterborough and Hampshire. After more than three decades as a family business, in 2018 Riverford became employee owned. Riverford has achieved B Corporation status, and been voted one of the UK's best 100 companies to work for. The company pays Real Living Wage, and offers a highly competitive package of rewards including pension, profit share and free veg.

#### THE CHALLENGE

For any grower, people are a significant element of the business – both in terms of costs and impact on productivity. This makes it vital to attract and retain good people, and to maintain workers' efficiency. Labour issues are not just a question of quantity but also of the quality of work delivered, and of the experience offered to workers. With a relatively large team it can be difficult to build personal relationships or instill a sense of connection to a farm. Without emotional connections to their work and employer, staff may be less likely to commit to a job long term or for multiple seasons.

**The challenge is to ensure employees are motivated to do good work, and feel part of a business.**

## THE RESPONSE 1: EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP

Riverford is now majority owned by employees: 77% is in an Employee Trust, benefiting all employees equally. Founder-owner Guy Singh-Watson retains the remaining shares and an active role. This change came with a new governance system with the majority share held by the Trust overseen by a board. The company's values – defined in consultation with staff – are set out in a statement under the guardianship of the trustees. This arrangement makes it very difficult for Riverford to be sold. The intention behind this model was partly to ensure such protection and independence. For staff this certainty about the future is reassuring:

***“It’s put in a lot of stability because you don’t feel ‘what’s going to happen next?’ ”.***

A second motivation was to recognise and reward everyone who contributes to the business. As co-owners, employees receive a share of profits meaning it is in their interest for the business to do well. This reward system is non-hierarchical and not confined to permanent staff, meaning that it treats everyone as equally deserving. As well as providing a material benefit, this structure conveys that all roles are valuable to the business:

***“everyone plays their part really in the whole”.***

The result is a virtuous circle where people want to do the best for the business so it thrives and it only succeeds if everyone contributes.

The move to employee ownership has been very positively received by employees, and is seen to have brought a change in culture across the organisation:

***“it – I think – basically enshrined a greater feeling of oneness, like the fact that we’re all referred to as co-owners”.***

It has also encouraged staff to feel more invested in the organisation:

***“because we are owned by ourselves we’re more interested in looking after ourselves”.***

All co-owners share responsibility for improving conditions, meaning it is in everyone's interest to raise and address issues. The new sense of co-operation and increase in communication of feedback is closely connected with the second aspect of the new structure and associated mechanisms.





## THE RESPONSE 2: EMPLOYEE VOICE

One of the structures established to support co-ownership was a new Council, including representatives nominated by teams across the operation. This offers a democratic way to hear and decide on issues from all employees. Staff were also positive about this system and its impact:

***“It does feel like people are a lot more engaged. I think we’re hearing more issues and more complaints but I think that’s because people now think that something might happen about it. I don’t think they’re new complaints. I think they’re ones from before when people said there’s no point in saying anything because nothing will ever happen”.***

In addition to the Council, the business has acted on feedback from the staff survey which highlighted a desire for more communication and information beyond daily instructions. This was implemented through more use of notice boards, briefings and meetings to spread detail down through all levels of staff.

Such changes take time to become embedded, and it is difficult to balance the need to communicate with the risk of information overload.

Whilst employees appreciate the importance of communication, they noted that there is still a risk of focusing on crucial instructions and over-looking more detailed background on the business which colleagues are often interested in. It also creates additional workload:

***“A councillor needs a certain amount of time to go to the council meeting but also to chat to the people in their constituencies”.***

Staff conveyed that it is still relatively early days for this new working culture:

***“I think there’s a lot of willingness to make it happen but people were still finding the right ways to do that on a practical level”.***

Effective communication requires administrative and logistical systems to support it, but also that people in key positions are skilled in communicating with others. This is part of an ongoing change in culture and mindset, as everyone comes to realise effective communication as a fundamental part of their role. As one employee described it, supervising a team is not about telling people what to do but involving them, and this is a skilled role.

## LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

Riverford's new business and governance structure has instilled an organisational culture promoting a sense of ownership and engagement:

***“everybody is always very involved and that’s great to be a part of a company that you can actually influence into and not just be a number or just another person”.***

It fosters the sense that employees are valued, and rewards them in material and non-material ways for their contributions. The results are apparent in the B Corporation's assessment of the company as a very good place to work. Staff were also quick to speak about how they enjoy working for Riverford, that it has a friendly and inclusive atmosphere.

Although pay and benefits for employees clearly make a difference, this is not all that makes a business people want to work for. Treating people well also includes listening to them, then acting on their concerns, or suggestions for how to do things better. This includes moving beyond communication which simply aims to convey what task needs to be done, to interacting in a more personal way. Team members want to be treated as individuals, by supervisors who communicates with patience and consideration.

‘People skills’ are a key part of what makes a good manager or supervisor, and being led by someone with this ability makes a difference to employee morale and productivity.



### CONTACT:

**Dr Hannah Pitt**

School of Geography and Planning  
Cardiff University

[pitth2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:pitth2@cardiff.ac.uk)

[cardiff.ac.uk/geography-planning](https://cardiff.ac.uk/geography-planning)

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