

## Lance Warmington, Silver Fern Farms *Walk the Talk*

Lance Warmington encourages staff at Silver Fern Farms to lose it – literally.

The Biggest Loser programme is just one of the initiatives the plant manager has introduced at the company's Dargaville site to improve the health, wellbeing and education of staff. The Biggest Loser programme is run in conjunction with Sport Northland and promotes healthy eating and weight loss. Prizes are awarded to employees who achieve their health goals, and a community garden and gym have been created onsite.

Silver Fern Farms Limited is New Zealand's largest red meat processor and exporter, with 14 plants and approximately 7000 staff around the country. The Dargaville plant is the largest employer in the town, so the programmes Lance has introduced for staff have not only benefited individuals and the company, but the wider community as well.

Lance's team is ethnically diverse with 63 per cent Māori, 23 per cent New Zealand European and 11 per cent Pasifika. After identifying a variety of limitations amongst workers, including low literacy and numeracy levels, a programme known as Akoranga Mauri Ora (Learning for Life) was developed. With funding from TEC, the programme provides one-on-one support from mentors, and group sessions on a wide variety of topics that apply not just to participants' work lives, but their personal ones as well.

Chief Executive Dean Hamilton says the skills and confidence of staff at the Dargaville plant have increased significantly as a result, leading to positive outcomes for the company.

"Lance wanted to help our people build their literacy skills, their numeracy skills and their life skills. He championed this project himself. He convinced people from the broader community to commit their time to help him achieve his idea. He realised that having a workforce that could read and write would help with health and safety, and would help with understanding our quality standards. Just as importantly, he realised that having a workforce that could personally budget would give those people greater financial security and with that greater likelihood of staying in the Dargaville workforce," he says.

"We have seen a reduction in accidents at our Dargaville plant. We have seen a decrease in staff turnover. We have seen an increase in staff engagement. I believe the skill development investment has played a key part in driving these outcomes."

The programme has been life-changing for staff on a variety of levels. Achievements range from gaining the literacy skills to be able to read a bedtime story to children, to having the budgeting skills to be able to save for and buy a home. Others have gained the life skills needed to cope with addiction and mental health issues within their wider family.

Lance's support of the Ministry of Social Development's Skills for Industry programme and the T500 scheme aimed at getting young Northlanders into work or training has seen him employ more than 100



people previously reliant on benefits. Once employed, they've had the full support of the company's assistance programmes. He has also worked hard to encourage other employers in the area to train people out of unemployment.

Dargaville Work and Income Service Centre Manager Rae Sowter says Lance's strong leadership has made a significant difference in the lives of those he has employed.

"Lance is very clear when establishing his expectations and communicating these to others. Whilst setting and sharing team and individual goals and expectations, Lance ensures that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and what is required of them. His communication is always clear and concise, but he also has compassion for the people that he is working with and will always go the extra mile to accommodate individual circumstances wherever possible. His goal is to always provide opportunities for his people, sometimes against his better judgement. He gives up on no one and believes that everyone should be given a second chance to better themselves," says Rae.

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