

## Skills Highway Award Entrant: Silver Fern Farms



Video Link <https://vimeo.com/178545439/01d3dc67>

At a Northland meat export processing plant, workplace learning has become much more than simply teaching staff how to comprehend task descriptions and meet health and safety compliance standards.

Silver Fern Farms Dargaville site is committed to delivering its staff a “learning for life” programme so that they can tackle the everyday tasks that are stepping stones to accomplishing important life goals. This could mean anything from understanding your pay slip to reading a child’s report or, in one case, filling in the forms needed to get a mortgage approved.

Silver Fern Farms is the largest meat export processor in New Zealand, with a workforce of approximately 7000 at the peak of the season. The company has 19 processing sites strategically located throughout New Zealand.

The Dargaville site is the major employer in the Kaipara region and employs a total workforce of around 300, of which 270 are process operators. The workforce is an ethnic mix of 63 per cent New Zealand Maori, 11 per cent Pasifika, 23 per cent New Zealand European, one per cent Asian and two per cent other.

Plant Manager Lance Warmington says the company has always carried out literacy and numeracy assessments on new staff but until recently has not followed up the results. But an analysis of process issues resulting in product being rejected at rollout stage and staff not delivering critical health and safety aspects within tasks, revealed many of the team couldn’t read important documents or put what they read into context within their day-to-day roles.

Lance began working with Silver Fern Farms National Training Manager Graham Sinclair and Sarah Searle from training provider Primary ITO. After analysing staff literacy and numeracy results, the group decided to apply for an employer-led Workplace Literacy Fund from TEC.

The fund was used to employ a NCALNE tutor to support a programme allowing for one-on-one support for trainees provided by mentors, as well as group sessions, which would be available to all staff who wanted to be a part of it.

The Akoranga Mauri Ora (Learning for Life) programme was first rolled out to management – once they were committed to the project, they were asked to select people with the right attitude to be mentors.

Mentors were given a full day's training and attended a series of peer support meetings that included the training manager hired by the plant. The first group session, 'understanding your pay slip', was put together and delivered by one of the mentors.

After the class the whole plant was "abuzz" with discussion on unions, holiday pay, Kiwisaver and the Meat Industry Super Scheme, among other things, Lance says.

A second group session on budgeting was held, then the programme changed slightly to a more one-on-one service to cement the instruction given.

"It was about being fluid in our approach and reverting to a less 'set' programme, giving some power to the mentees. The beauty about this approach was they learnt at their own pace," says Lance. Several one-on-one sessions work better for those with short attention spans than a long session once a week.

There are now 16 mentors in the programme; 13 staff from within the processing departments, the literacy and numeracy tutor overseeing the programme, and a bank manager and a former farmer who live in the community and volunteered their services.

While Lance has been the main driver of the programme, attending as many group sessions and mentor support meetings as he can, other senior Dargaville staff have also been very supportive. Silver Ferns CEO Dean Hamilton and the company's Chief Operating Officer Kevin Winders have backed the programme after seeing the benefits for staff. Lance is now involved in promoting the programme to other senior managers in Silver Fern Farms, and is helping another site apply for funding to run Akoranga Mauri Ora.

"We don't foresee an end date to this programme. The funding we applied for was merely a kick-start to get this off the ground," Lance says.

He believes Akoranga Mauri Ora has improved productivity and communication within the team as new employees are exposed to the programme from day one and are coached through their new tasks.

Health and safety compliance has improved, lost-time injuries have decreased year-on-year, strains and sprains have dropped by a third and near-miss reporting has increased, giving the company a chance to fix safety issues. Lance believes the learning programme has contributed to these improvements.

"We've had a reduction in quality claims this year. Our staff turnover remains high but we are seeing some of those leaving going to advance themselves in their career paths at university or overseas."

For staff, the benefits have been wide-ranging. New employees report they feel part of the team early on and have the confidence to ask questions openly. Some staff bring whanau members to mentor sessions so they can better understand important topics.

Mentors are encouraging their mentees to work out what is important to them and set goals, with budgeting playing an important part in many of sessions.

"One of our employees had a goal with her partner of buying their own home. They felt it was 10 years away. Within the following month, they had been guided through the application process and have had their loan approved," Lance says.

The programme also helped two employees struggling to pay their rent, mortgage and bills. An appointment was made with their banking facility and finances were restructured to clear outstanding bills, in one case stopping the bank from moving forward with a mortgagee sale.

"One of our team members was screened for dyslexia and we acquired tools to assist him with his learning difficulties. I recall the day he approached me to thank me as now he finally knows what's wrong and that he's not a 'dummy' as he put it. It was hard for me to hold back the tears in front of my team. This guy is now going through a Boning Apprenticeship.

"We have a fundamental belief: Train people well enough so they can leave- treat them well enough so they do not want to."