

LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

OCTOBER 2024
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A comprehensive guide to

Carrying out a cultural assessment on farm

Why it matters and how to do it

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- WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?
- THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT
- EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS
- EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS
- HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT
- PRACTICAL STEPS



What is a cultural assessment and why does it matter?

A cultural assessment is a process used to understand the values, beliefs, practices, traditions and behaviours that shape the way a business is run.

For family farms, a cultural assessment can involve examining the family’s approach to farming, their relationship with the land, decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships within the family, and how their farming identity aligns with the broader agricultural community or marketplace. Cultural assessments matter to farm businesses of all sizes for a variety of reasons, including:

Preservation of values and traditions Small family farms often pass down values, traditions, and farming practices through generations. A cultural assessment helps identify what is most important to the family, such as sustainable practices, local community involvement, or maintaining a specific type of crop or livestock. Understanding and preserving these traditions can provide a sense of continuity and purpose for future generations.

Improved communication and decision-making Family farms involve multiple generations or family members working together, and each may have different ideas or perspectives. A cultural assessment highlights underlying values and expectations, which can help improve communication and facilitate smoother decision-making.

Succession planning Transitioning a farm from one generation to the next can be challenging. A cultural assessment can help clarify the vision and values that need to be maintained through



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

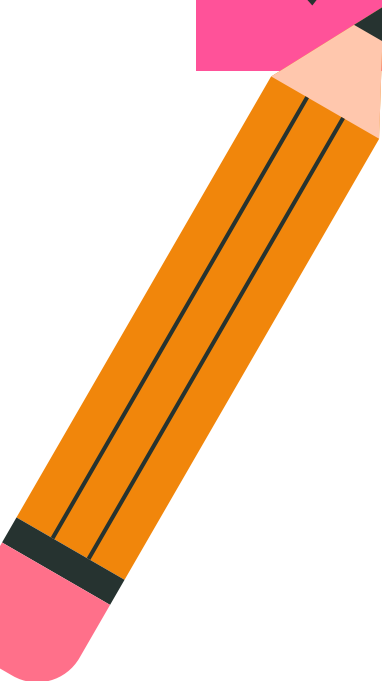
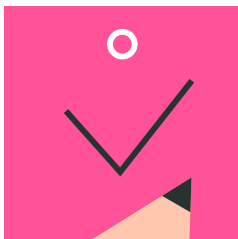
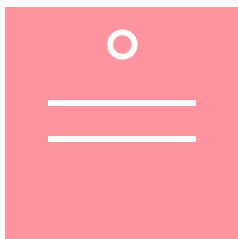
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS



this process. It can reveal the family’s views on leadership, roles and responsibilities, which are crucial for developing an effective succession plan that respects both the farm’s legacy and its future potential. It can also help to identify whether cultural attitudes, such as a desire to pass the farm on to a son over a daughter, are preventing successful succession planning.

Adaptation to change Agriculture is constantly evolving due to changes in technology, market demands, and environmental conditions. A cultural assessment can help a farm identify how open they are to change and innovation while still holding on to core values. This balance is important for making decisions about adopting new farming techniques, sustainable practices, or entering new markets.

Strengthening identity and community engagement Many farms rely on community support, whether through local markets, co-operatives, or regional branding. Understanding the cultural identity of the farm can enhance its connection with the community. For example, farms that emphasise organic or regenerative methods may appeal more to certain customer bases, and a clear cultural identity can be leveraged for marketing and storytelling.

Conflict resolution Family dynamics can be complex, and when business is mixed with family, tensions can arise. A cultural assessment can help uncover the sources of potential conflicts, such as differences in work styles, financial goals or personal values. This process can provide a framework for resolving disputes in a way that honours family relationships while keeping the farm business intact.

Long-term resilience A clear understanding of the cultural framework of a farm helps build resilience, especially in tough times. Farms that are in touch with their cultural roots tend to have a stronger sense of purpose and community support, which can be vital in navigating challenges like financial pressures, environmental changes, or shifts in agricultural policy.

CASE STUDY: JAMES TRETT

James Trett, managing director of recruitment agency JP Trett, knows how cultural assessments can help agricultural businesses attract the right people. He believes those that understand their values and beliefs gain a big advantage when it comes to hiring.

“Agriculture is changing,” says James. “Farming used to be all about sticking to the same old ways and resisting change. But that just doesn’t work anymore, especially when you’re trying to recruit.”

Many businesses still hire based on personality rather than culture, he says. “If you take the time to figure out what your farm stands for in key areas, you’ll find it much easier to bring in people who fit with what you’re looking for.”

Even though the term “cultural assessment” might sound formal, James says most owners or managers are already doing bits of it without realising. “When we recruit, we always ask the employers about their values, why they enjoy working there, and what growth opportunities look like. Most farms don’t have a formal guide, but they still know what their business is all about.”



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

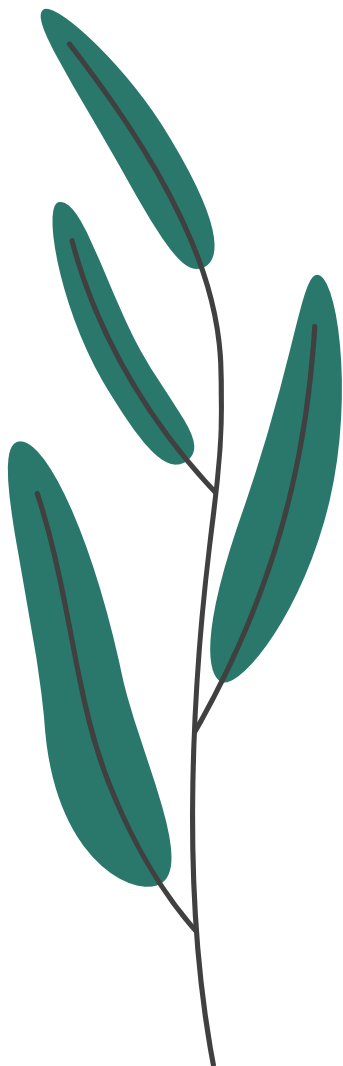
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS



CASE STUDY CONTINUED: JAMES TRETT

For James, these cultural assessments aren't just about recruitment – they are a sign that a business is serious about its future. “When a company has a clear cultural assessment in place, it shows they know where they're heading and who they want on board.”

With the market now more candidate-driven, wellbeing and flexible working are key, especially post Covid, when mindsets changed. Companies can no longer afford to ignore the demands of the workplace, and those who adapt are the ones who succeed.

“Recruiting has changed,” says James. “You can't just post a job ad and list the basic skills required. You've got to sell the role and make it inclusive because if candidates see one thing they can't do, they move on. So, you've got to sell what makes your business unique and be open to compromise on things like experience.”

But hiring the right person is more than checking off skills, he adds. “You want someone who actually wants to work for your business because they believe in what you do.” James stresses retention of staff is more crucial than ever. “People know the grass can be greener elsewhere, especially with the skills shortage in farming. If they're not happy, they'll leave.” Agricultural businesses with strong leadership, fair working conditions, and clear values will stand out.

And the old-school mentality of working from dawn until dusk? “It doesn't cut it anymore,” he says. “The older generation might work his fingers to the bone because that's how it always has been done, but the younger generation are looking for wellbeing and work-life balance.”

James recalls working with one very successful supply business recently that almost missed out on a great candidate because of their rigid thinking. “We found a fantastic professional marketing candidate willing to work condensed hours for a lower base salary because they loved the company and it was local to them,” he says.

“But the business nearly backed out because they were worried about how it would look to their full-time staff who had been with them for 20 or so years, working 12- to 14-hour days. “We explained they had got this talented person willing to work for half of what they could earn elsewhere because they believed in what they represent, the brand and the beliefs generally, but they didn't believe in working those long hours like ‘Fred’, who's been there for 20 years. Do they really need to keep things the same way?”

For those feeling overwhelmed about where to start, James offers some simple advice. “Start small. Look at your leadership style, values, and beliefs. Be honest about where you are and where you want to be. If you're stuck, talk to someone like us who knows what candidates are looking for.”

James is confident that the business' willing to adapt will thrive. “Flexible working, well-being, and good leadership are what attract and keep the best talent. It's not all about the paycheck anymore,” he says.

In the end, cultural assessments aren't just a nice-to-have – they're essential. “If you're not ready to change,” James says, “you won't be able to hire anyone. It's as simple as that.”



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

The business case for carrying out a cultural assessment

In today’s fast-paced farming world, a farm’s success relies on more than good soil, healthy stock and ideal weather conditions.

Your farm’s culture – the way your team works together, how safe and satisfied they feel, and how they communicate – plays a huge role. That’s where cultural assessments come into play.

A cultural assessment is basically a health check for your farm’s working environment. It helps you see what’s going well and what could improve when it comes to staff morale, teamwork and safety. Most importantly, it gets you thinking about your farm’s values, beliefs, and how they shape the way your workers go about their jobs.

At first, many farmers might be hesitant to dive into something like this. When you are managing the day-to-day grind of a farm, setting aside time to think about workplace culture can seem more of a hassle than a help. But when you take the time to assess the unique culture of your farm, whether balancing tradition and new technology or managing family dynamics and seasonal staff, it gives you a clearer idea of where your business is headed.

A good cultural assessment also helps you build a more productive, happy, and loyal team, which in this day and age is no mean feat. The process goes beyond just keeping your operation running smoothly. It’s about improving retention, ensuring safety, driving innovation, and promoting diversity in your workforce. When done right, it can also help to identify barriers your staff may be facing when carrying out their work.

Farmers Weekly’s landmark survey on women in agriculture, **published at the start of 2024 as part of the Level The Field campaign**, found some differences between how men and women view the culture in their workplace.

Encouragingly, a huge 85% of women and 95% of men said their workplace culture was healthy, in terms of being inviting for women. But more men were likely to describe the culture as “very healthy” than women (46% for men against 37% for women), and women were more likely to say it was “unhealthy” than men (13% for women versus 4% for men).

Putting in the work to understand why your male and female staff might feel differently about workplace culture is important to improve morale and keep your best staff. “Carrying out a cultural assessment offers a place to start, which can be one of the more difficult challenges, and gives structure to the process which can otherwise feel overwhelming,” says Laura Harpham, senior agriculture consultant at Ricardo.

“That can allow the start of conversations which otherwise might not happen. It’s often easier to say ‘yes, that’s been a challenge for me too’ in response to a point raised by someone else, or research data, than responding to a question like ‘tell us all the challenges you’ve faced’. That can then hopefully lead to ways about solving it.”



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

Benefits of a cultural assessment for farm employers

1. Helps hold on to good staff

We all know that finding – and keeping – good workers is tough, especially with changing expectations. Nowadays, people want more than just a wage; they want a decent work environment, fair treatment, training opportunities, inclusivity and a sense of purpose.

A cultural assessment helps you figure out why staff might be leaving or feeling unappreciated. By making a few changes, whether it's **improving working conditions** or **working practices**, your team are more likely to stay with you for the long haul.

2. Boosts productivity

When your team is on the same page, understands your farm's values, and feels supported, they'll naturally get more done. A cultural assessment helps uncover what's slowing down your team, whether it's frustration with processes or management style. With those insights, you can smooth things over and improve your productivity, leading to a more profitable farm business.

3. Keeps you on the right side of the law

Farming can be risky and making sure you're compliant with safety regulations is essential. A cultural assessment can show you where your health and safety practices need improvement, helping you avoid hefty fines and, more importantly, keep your workers safe. A safer workforce is a more productive one, with fewer injuries and absences.

4. Takes care of wellbeing

Farm work can be physically tough and mentally draining. A cultural assessment helps ensure your team feels safe, supported and valued. When workers feel cared for – whether that be through fair pay, good working conditions or mental health support – they are more likely to stay, work efficiently, and contribute to a positive atmosphere. Plus, fewer accidents and stress-related absences mean less disruption overall.

5. Promotes innovation

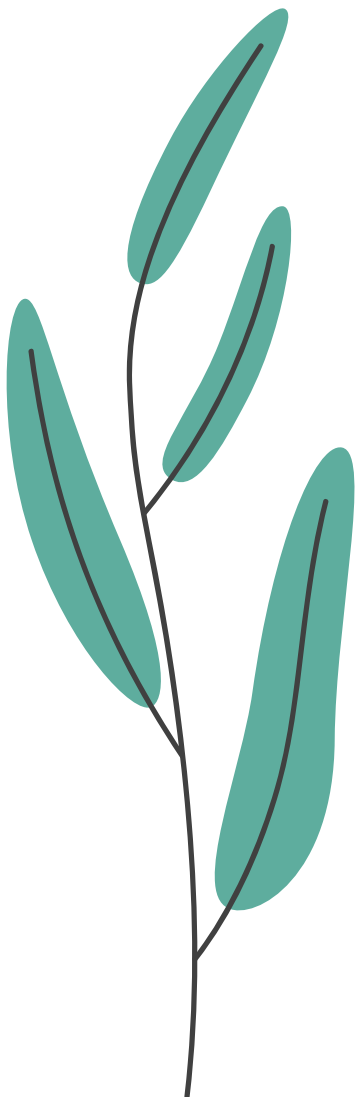
While some farms embrace new tech, software and automation with excitement, others stick with traditional methods out of entrenched habit. A cultural assessment helps you understand how open your team is to change or whether they worry about it and if they feel encouraged to share ideas. Fostering a culture of innovation keeps your farm competitive and sustainable for the future.

6. Strengthens leadership

Great leadership is key, especially on smaller farms where relationships are more direct and personal. Are you the kind of leader who listens and gives clear direction, or do you tend to take a more hands-off approach? If there are family dynamics at play, how are they handled? Knowing how your leadership style is affecting your team can help you improve communication, build trust, and make sure your leadership is more effective.

7. Builds a good reputation

A farm with a positive workplace culture will naturally build a good reputation. Happy, satisfied workers are more likely to speak well of the farm, attracting not just new employees but potential business opportunities as well.



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

Benefits of a cultural assessment for farm employees

1. Job satisfaction and engagement

A cultural assessment gives employees a voice. When workers feel heard and see changes based on their feedback, it boosts their satisfaction and motivation. A happier, more engaged team leads to a farm business that runs more smoothly.

2. Better working environment

Poor communication can lead to all sorts of issues. A cultural assessment can help to spot communication barriers, such as language differences, encouraging better teamwork and understanding. It can also improve the physical and social aspects of the farm, such as safer work conditions or a more supportive environment.

3. Fairness and inclusivity

A cultural assessment helps uncover any biases or inequities in the workplace, such as favouritism, exclusion or discrimination against certain groups (for example, family members, migrant workers, women or minority employees). Fixing these issues leads to a more inclusive and fair working environment where all employees feel valued.

4. Opportunities to grow

Employees want to learn and develop their skills. A cultural assessment might reveal opportunities for training or mentorship, giving workers a chance to grow professionally and stay satisfied in their roles.

5. Better health and safety

Farm work can be dangerous, so for farm employees, safety is a critical concern. Asking questions can help establish where safety practices are lacking, or where certain staff may need more support, leading to better training, consistent use of safety kit and fewer injuries.

6. Stronger sense of belonging

When employees feel their contributions are valued and recognised, they develop a sense of belonging. This boosts morale, positivity and creates a team that works better together and take pride in their work.

7. Work-life balance

Long hours, especially during busy seasons, can take a toll. If the assessment reveals that work-life balance is off, it might lead to changes that help employees manage their time better and reduce burnout.

8. Empowerment and participation

Participating in a cultural assessment gives employees a say in shaping their workplace. This sense of ownership makes them more invested in the farm's success, and challenges, and improves overall job satisfaction. Even small misunderstandings can snowball into larger problems on the farm, affecting team dynamics and lowering productivity. Identifying tensions or communication gaps early means you can nip issues in the bud before they turn into bigger conflicts. Introducing new or better ways to resolve disputes will ensure things run more smoothly and result in fewer misunderstandings and less friction between staff.



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

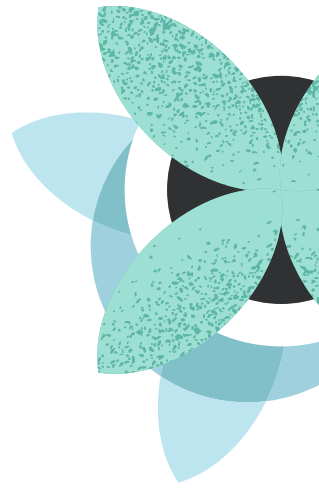
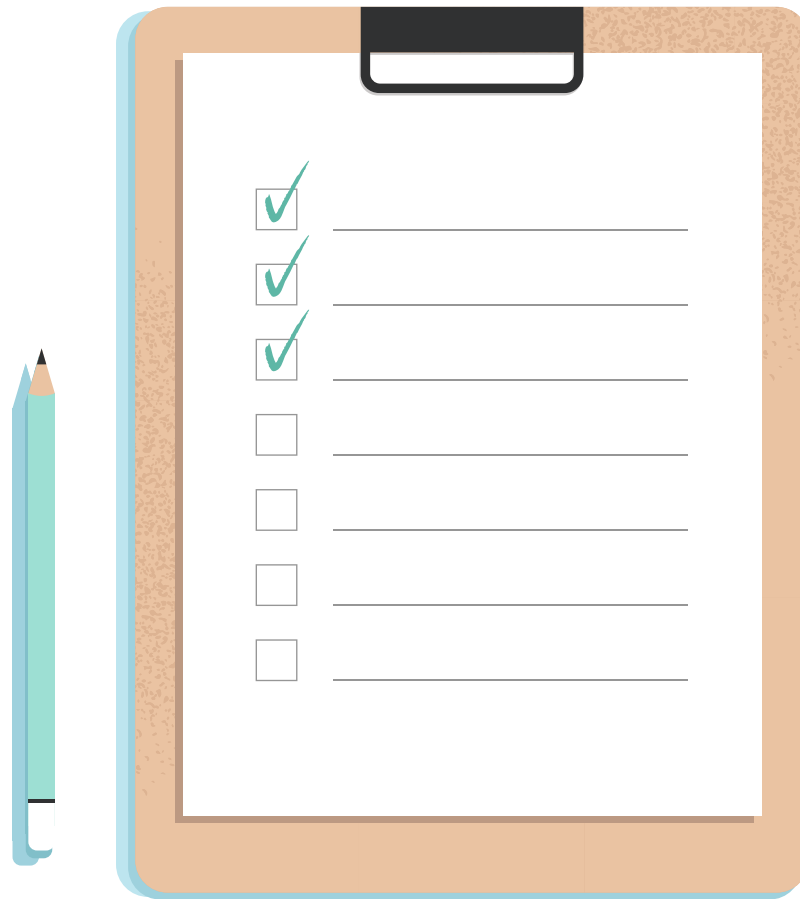
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS



How to carry out a cultural assessment

Cultural assessments can be as simple or as detailed as you need and vary significantly between businesses. So where do you start? A cultural assessment typically involves observations, good old-fashioned conversations with your team, or even surveys if the size of the business warrants it.

What shapes the culture in your farm business?

Before you jump into the assessment, it's important to understand what makes your farm's culture unique. Here are some common factors that influence workplace culture in agriculture.

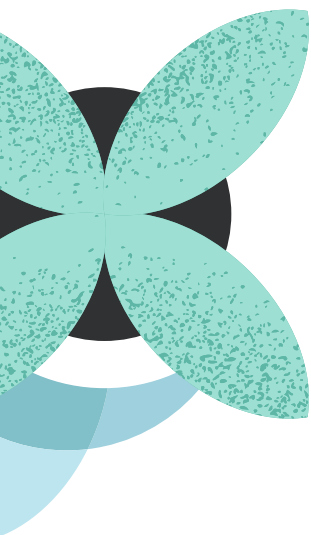
Nature of the work Farming is tough – physically and mentally. It's tied to the land, the seasons, and hitting targets, all of which can impact how your team feel and work together.

Diverse workforce Farms often have workers from various age groups, backgrounds and education levels. This mix can affect everything from communication to teamwork.

Family v corporate farms The culture can be very different on a small, family-run farm than on a larger corporate operation, with grandparent, parent, child and sibling dynamics at play.

Safety and regulations Adhering to safety standards and government regulations isn't just a box-ticking exercise – it's a huge part of keeping your workers safe and productive.

Technology and innovation How open is your farm to embracing new technologies? Your attitude towards change can tell you a lot about your workplace culture.



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

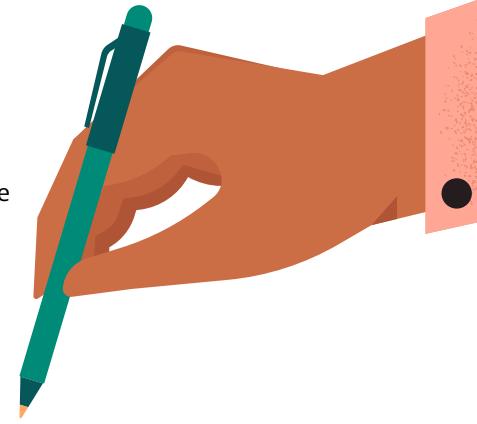
HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

Determine key focus areas

Define why you want to assess your culture and what you hope to achieve by doing so. Do you want to identify your team's strengths and weaknesses, align your team with the organisation's vision and values, or address specific issues or challenges?

Your purpose will guide your choice of questions, methods and outcomes for your cultural assessment. Every farm is different, so it's important to pinpoint the specific factors that influence your team's productivity, safety, well-being and job satisfaction. By focusing on these areas, you can address issues that might be holding your farm back and make improvements where they matter most.



Pinpointing what matters most

Once you've got a handle on the factors that influence your farm's culture and what you want the assessment to achieve, it's time to focus on key areas to evaluate. This will help you see what's working and what needs improvement. The first step is identifying pain points within the team, which requires input from everyone. Here are some things you may want to consider.

Workplace values and ethics What does your farm stand for? Is it tradition, sustainability, or teamwork? How do you communicate these values with the people who work with you? Do your workers understand and align with these values?

Workforce diversity and inclusion Is your team diverse in terms of age, gender and background? How well do you handle cultural differences? Are there inclusivity practices in place? What steps are in place to encourage a better understanding of cultural differences?

Family dynamics On a family farm, personal relationships can blur professional boundaries. It's important to recognise this dynamic when assessing culture. Do individual family members receive preferential treatment or harsher criticism? How does this affect overall morale?

Leadership and management How do you interact with your team? Do you lead with a hands-on approach, or are you more hands-off? How do you give feedback, and is it a two-way street?

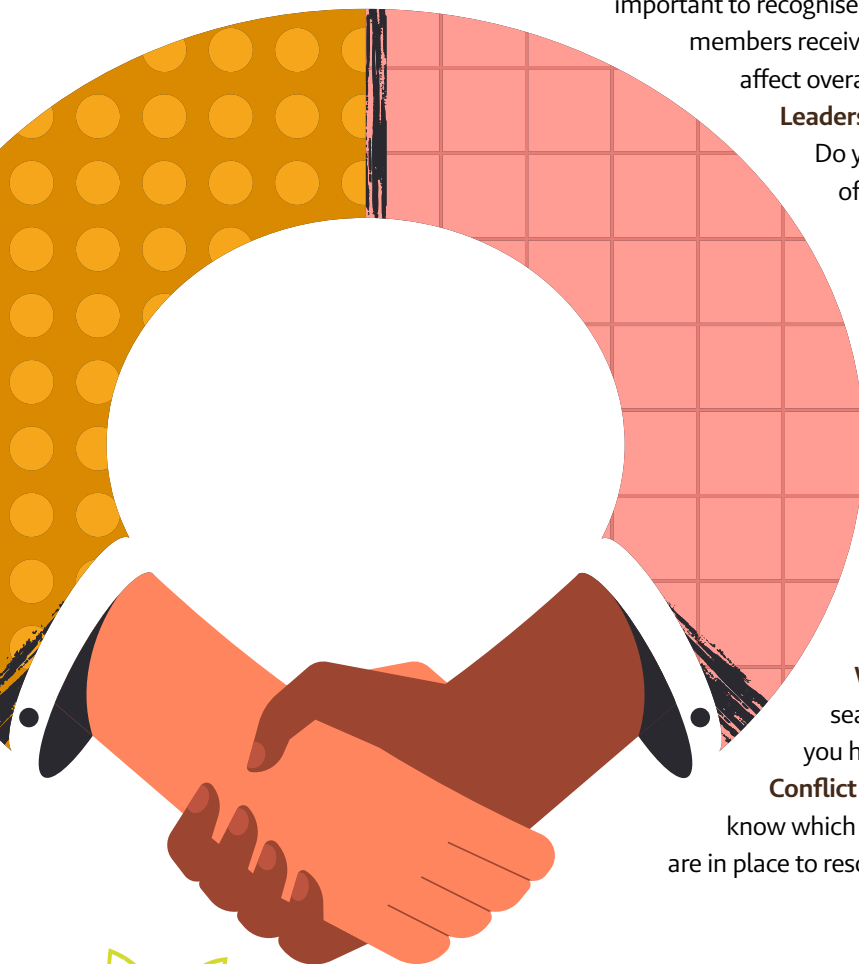
Health, safety and wellbeing What safety measures are in place around machinery, chemicals, livestock handling and key daily activities and how do you ensure they're adhered to? How do you promote mental and physical wellbeing, especially during stressful times like harvest or lambing? How are injuries and health risks assessed?

Innovation and adaptability Is your farm open to new ideas and technologies, or do you resist change?

Communication and collaboration How well does your team communicate? Are workers involved in decision-making, or are they just there to do the tasks? What is the physical and social atmosphere like?

Work-life balance Are your workers burning out during peak seasons? Is there job security? Does your team feel valued? Do you have a flexible approach to working hours?

Conflict resolution How do you handle disagreements? Do staff know which behaviours you regard as non-negotiable? What practices are in place to resolve disagreements or challenges, so staff feel supported?



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

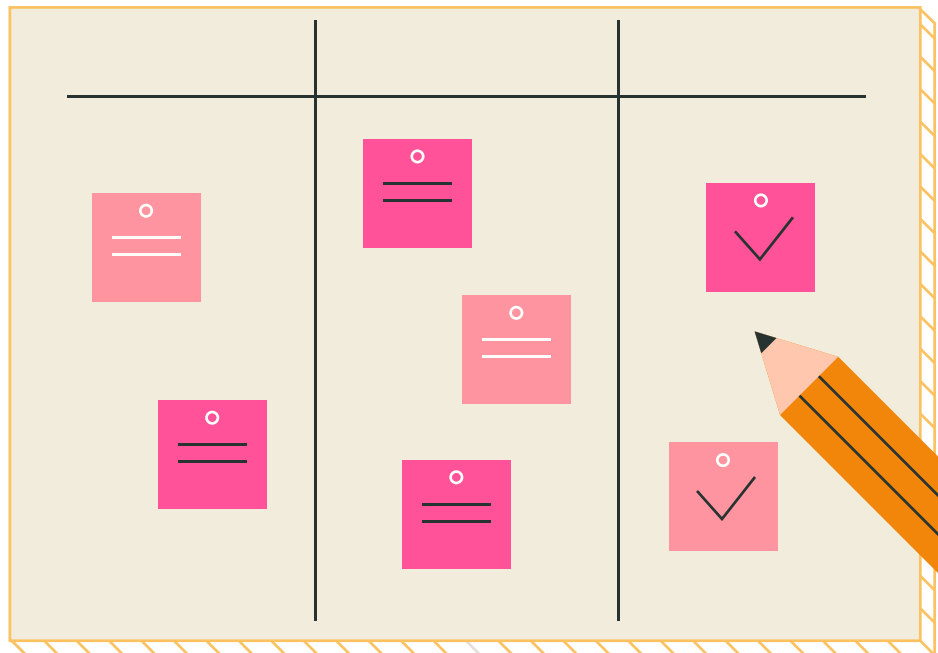
THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS



Practical steps

Step 1: Collect the right data

Gathering good, reliable information is key. Ideally you will want to mix experiences and opinions with numbers to get a full picture of your farm’s culture. Here are some ways to consider doing this.

Observation

- Spend time on-site and observe how things work day-to-day. You’ll learn a lot by simply watching.
- Look for how people communicate, respond to challenges or mistakes, work together, and follow safety rules. Harvesting, drilling, managing animal or crop disease, event management or even open farm days are good opportunities to observe your team under pressure
- Consider whether tasks are delegated fairly. **Farmers Weekly’s Level The Field research** found 40% of women believed they were not treated equally in daily work routines. Females are often steered towards working with youngstock and away from tractor work, for example. If this is the case on your farm, reflect on why – is it because the women want to do the work they’re currently doing, or are cultural attitudes about gender roles playing a part? Would the women value training to do any jobs they’re not currently doing?

Interviews and focus groups

- Talk to a cross-section of people – farm owners, managers, and workers from different areas.
- For focus groups, bring together a mix of staff, such as farmhands, machine operators and admin workers, to get a range of perspectives.

Surveys and questionnaires

- Keep the language straightforward (and use multiple languages if needed) to suit all educational backgrounds.
- Include both permanent staff and seasonal workers – everyone’s input counts.
- Use a mix of tick-box questions (like rating scales) and open-ended ones such as “what could improve the work environment here?”



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

Step 2: Analyse the data

Once you've collected the data, the results should reveal some patterns and things to work on. You can organise the feedback into the categories you've defined as important to your business.

Step 3: Put together an action plan

- Show the results to your team and propose clear, actionable recommendations.
- Keep it practical and don't overcomplicate it. For example, suggest simple ways to improve communication, safety practices or inclusivity policies.
- Pilot test the recommendations with your team and work through any objections.
- The final plan, as well as including recommendations, should assign responsibility for any tasks, set a timeline for their completion, and estimate any costs.

Step 4: Make the changes and track progress

- Identifying the issues is only half the challenge. Once you implement the changes, it's important to keep an eye on how things are going and tweak them if necessary.
- Annual check-ins can help you track progress and make sure any cultural changes are sticking.

TOP TIPS AT A GLANCE

- Define what you are hoping to achieve by carrying out a cultural assessment
- Start small – focus on what's most important for your farm
- Consider how family dynamics may affect workplace culture
- Involve everyone in discussions
- Track the progress of any changes made



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS



CASE STUDY: LISA BLINKHORNE

As HR manager at 125-year-old agricultural machinery business Ernest Doe & Sons, Lisa Blinkhorne is all too familiar with the challenges of evolving a company deeply rooted in tradition. With a workforce that spans generations and a customer base that reflects this long-standing heritage, the company faces unique obstacles when it comes to adapting to modern workplace dynamics.

Lisa emphasises the importance of understanding employee perspectives, recognising that even in an industry like agriculture, assumptions about workforce satisfaction can be misleading. “No business owner should be naive enough to think they know what their employees believe or feel,” she says. “The industry often assumes too much, and it’s important to have tools, like a cultural assessment guide, to truly gauge where the employees stand.”

However, implementing cultural assessments and change, regardless of a company’s size, comes with its own set of difficulties. In Lisa’s experience, people can fear feedback, and that makes the process daunting. “It’s challenging to implement, whether you have a large HR department or you’re a smaller unit,” she admits.

Lisa observes that the workplace has transformed significantly over the years, and what works for one employee may not work for another. “The market has moved on. People no longer stay with the same employer for life; they’re looking for more, not just higher salaries or better benefits packages.”

This trend has particularly affected the agricultural sector, which is struggling to find skilled workers. “It used to be easier to find individuals willing to work on farm machinery and put in long hours. But now, people want more work-life balance – they want to be home with their children, and they don’t want to be on call 24/7 during harvest or working outside in the winter.”

Lisa believes the agricultural industry in particular is driven by passion and emotion, which makes introducing concepts like cultural assessments even more intimidating. “Some employers are focused on getting the job done and can’t always worry about how their workforce is feeling,” she says. “The day finishes when the animals are fed, the seeds are in the ground, or the crops are harvested. Many expect everyone else to have that same mindset.”



WHAT IS A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT?

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

EMPLOYER BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS OF CULTURAL ASSESSMENTS

HOW TO CARRY OUT A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

PRACTICAL STEPS

CASE STUDY CONTINUED: LISA BLINKHORNE

However, Lisa recognises that this mindset may need to shift and that the business has been increasingly focusing on a more people-centered culture. "We emphasise that if you work hard and get the job done, there's flexibility. Yes, core roles need to be fulfilled, but we're always looking at other ways to provide balance."

She challenges traditional thinking in the industry, especially when it comes to time off during critical periods. "What happens if a farmworker breaks their leg during harvest? Does everything come to a grinding halt? No, because the job still needs to be done. So why can't we consider similar approaches when it comes to time off?"

For Lisa, the question is not whether the industry should remain rigid, but whether it's time to rethink long-standing norms. "Those who live and breathe agriculture might say 'it is what it is', but does it have to be that way? Or are we just afraid to try something new – like leveraging technology and AI – to make things easier and reduce burnout?"

YOUR COMMENTS WELCOME



REGISTER FOR FUTURE LEVEL THE FIELD GUIDES

GIVE FEEDBACK ON THE CAMPAIGN



EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY:

- **Kirsty Dean**, ASR Recruitment
- **Dr Jillian Manner**, workplace wellbeing expert, University of Edinburgh
- **Laura Harpham**, senior consultant at agricultural consultancy Ricardo
- **James Trett**, managing director at recruitment agency JP Trett
- **Lisa Blinkhorne**, HR manager, Ernest Doe & Sons

