

Swine Manager of the Year Article – Tim Kerkaert

The variety of leaders that make up the pork industry span across different ages, titles, areas in the production cycle, and specific expertise. In his 20 years of involvement in pig farming, Tim Kerkaert, the 2020 Swine Manager of Year award recipient, has risen to become a well-known leader within Boerboom Ag Resources.

Equipped with an agricultural background growing up on a hobby farm outside of Marshall, Minnesota, consisting of a handful of pigs and cattle, Kerkaert always enjoyed life on the farm. During the summers and on weekends, he frequented his grandparents farm, now the home farm for Boerboom Ag, and stayed involved showing pigs and cattle for 4-H.

Kerkaert's path to his current position as a Wean to Finish Service Manager at Boerboom Ag was a bit unconventional and not entirely where his 20-year old self pictured him ending up. His education at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU), where he graduated with a degree in business management and minor in agricultural business, originally led him to start his career in finance.

Two years after working the typical 8-5 day, and traveling back to the farm to work some evenings, Kerkaert decided to switch paths and come back to the world of agriculture. For a short period of time, he worked for a poultry company, and quickly realized his passion was pig farming.

"I feel like I have more of a connection with pigs," states Kerkaert. "You get more interaction with pigs raising them from wean to finish for nearly six months. They're also more inquisitive and will come up to you and interact with you, which I enjoy."

Two decades ago, when he came back to the world of pig farming, Boerboom Ag was in the process of expanding the business. Kerkaert saw the opportunity to come back, and was thrown right in, having the chance to oversee some of the sites.

Today, Kerkaert manages grow-to-finish sites, overseeing approximately 65,000 pig spaces. At each of the sites, he communicates with the contract growers and makes sure they all have the necessary tools and information needed to succeed.

When Kerkaert first began working with the company, the ratio of his work equated to 90 percent managing pigs and 10 percent managing people; today, the ratio has essentially flipped, being closer to 80 percent managing people and 20 percent managing pigs. He spends most of his time working with the marketing management team, employees, contract growers, and on building projects. Currently, four employees work directly under him; he takes charge in training them, along with many others.

Kerkaert notes, "I've been training people for 20 years, and have had contact and participated in the training of virtually all of our contract growers that work within the system now."

One of Kerkaert's favorite parts of training someone is working with them from the ground up and seeing their confidence grow throughout the process. He finds the process very rewarding and strives to get each employee to be as good, if not better, than himself.

When working with someone who essentially has no background in pig production, it is like any job – there are countless practices and rules that must be learned, but it takes time to fully understand the system. Kerkaert believes in making each individual feel comfortable, especially in the beginning weeks and months.

“You can't let them get too overwhelmed. It is important to explain all of the processes but help them realize they won't understand everything within a day, week, or even month,” offers Kerkaert. “It takes time to gain experience and confidence, but **when you see them develop confidence in their own decision-making, it is very rewarding.**”

Overall, Kerkaert notes it takes the average employee nearly six months to become comfortable making judgement calls on basic concepts, and years with more complicated decisions.

However, when it comes to managing people, his philosophy is to avoid micromanaging. He puts emphasis on the importance of allowing employees to make their own decisions to help them build confidence. His overall goal is to make each employee feel confident in their own decision-making, rather than constantly asking for his opinion to help them make decisions.

In pig farming, there are multiple ways to achieve the same result; allowing employees to develop their own protocols gives them a sense of ownership and assurance in their decisions. Even if an employee makes a decision Kerkaert does not necessarily believe in, he will permit the action, providing it does not cause any detriment to the company or the welfare of the pigs.

He notes, “Sometimes people learn faster by failing. I want them to see that their method didn't work, have them come up with reasons why it failed, and work with them to better analyze the situation.”

As a manager, it is important to understand each individual and work with them to figure out their strengths and weaknesses. Kerkaert's philosophy is to focus on each individual's strengths and place them in situations where their strengths are utilized.

“It's important to work on your weaknesses, but **if a person wants to succeed, they need to be put in situations that use their strengths** – they will grow faster that way,” Kerkaert adds.

The generational gap seen in the workforce today affords no exception to pig farming. The struggle to co-mingle and manage each generation provides certain challenges, but Kerkaert views these challenges as opportunities. Just as each individual brings a different dynamic into the system, so does each age group. On a daily basis, Kerkaert sees how the age differences between employees not only strengthens the system but strengthens each individual. The different generations develop each other in specific ways.

For example, younger generations are typically more apt to understanding and catching on to technological processes faster, whereas older generations problem solve in a more hands-on, back-to-the-basics, type of style. The unique balance creates a diverse learning environment where employees use each of their skillsets to improve the system.

Though the common trend seen in agriculture of fewer young people entering the workforce is undeniably true, Kerkaert feels Boerboom Ag Resources attracts younger generations. In the Marshall area, he has noticed the tendency for many young professionals to leave the farm, but then come back because they realize what they took for granted and have a better appreciation for it.

One of Kerkaert's proudest moments was assisting in bringing a contract grower's son back home to the farm. Together with the grower, he outlined the great opportunities pig farming has to offer and helped develop a building plan, followed through with the execution of seeing it come to life, and eventually the son returned to the farm after college.

Kerkaert's own background of leaving the farm, then returning back to it, is what instilled his passion for taking care of pigs and has kept him in the industry for so long. The company's values align with his own in that both believe in "providing the pigs with everything they need to give them the best opportunity to perform to the max and provide a sound, sustainable product for consumers."

His greatest goal as a manager is to see what needs to be done to maintain or ensure the animal's well-being, understand the employee's needs to achieve the desired outcome, and then balance that with the company goals.

Along with bringing younger generations back to the farm, Kerkaert takes pride in providing high quality products for consumers. He finds the idea of taking care of the pigs day in and day out to ensure a safe and healthy food supply for the world very rewarding and it is what motivates him most.

Six core values sit at the core of Boerboom Ag Resources: Resourceful, Collaborative, Integrity, Innovative, Expertise, and Dedication. Of these six, Kerkaert views integrity as the most important because it comes from within a person as opposed to a skill that can be taught. He expects each employee to maintain high integrity both within the company and outside the company.

Tim Kerkaert exudes integrity daily through his actions and the way he communicates and leads his team members. He has great understanding of the needs of the pigs, employees, company, and industry, which is what has made him such a successful manager, and someone the pork industry is lucky to have as a representative.