

Merging old values with new management culture

Successful transformation in agriculture has to be managed step by step. At ZZZ, personnel are trained into positions of responsibility. Cattle ownership and herd improvement are encouraged in an innovative way. **Nan Smith** spoke to **Paul Bester** about ZZZ's transformation initiative.

BELOW: A show group of PinZ²'ys being dipped in the crush. Study group members are encouraged to take part in shows because doing well gives them a sense of pride in their animals and is a measure of status, just as it does for established stud cattle breeders.

PHOTOS: NAN SMITH



It's 5.45am and the start of the ZZZ livestock management team's day in the Mooketsi Valley in Limpopo. Twenty-three managers, junior and senior, are seated at a conference table ready to start their daily meeting.

The man at the head of the table is Paul Bester, head of ZZZ's transformation initiative, which forms part of the farming conglomerate's nationwide operations.

The faces around the large table are predominantly black with a sprinkling of white, and mother tongue languages range from Afrikaans to Zulu. There are 11 distinct language groups here. Whatever the daily problems are, cultural and racial differences seem to be absent from the list. These are people with large herds, a great number of hectares, water points, fencing, grazing, roads, pipelines and other people to manage.

Long-term strategies flow into medium and short-term projects and into the details of the working day.

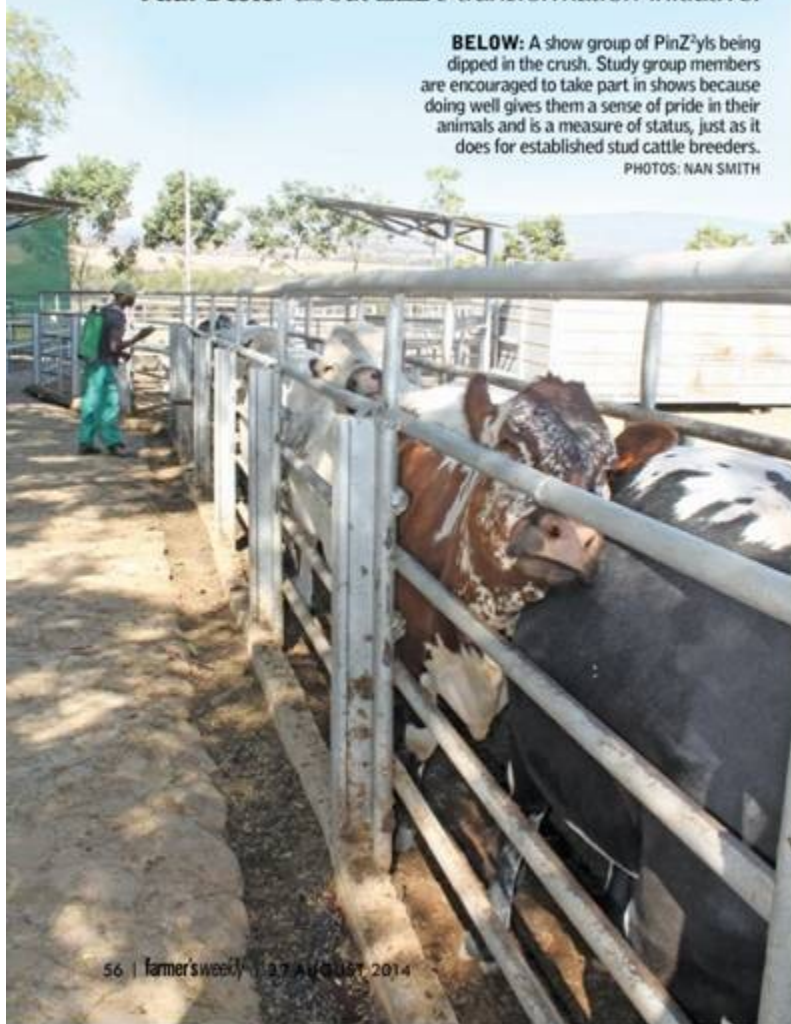
"Every morning, managers commit to the day's tasks," says Paul. "If there's a problem and something cannot be done, the manager reports to his senior or to me."

WORK DEMANDING COMMITMENT

Managing livestock means an endless cycle of checking, counting, feeding, breeding, calving, weaning, dipping, dosing, vaccinating and rotating. It's 'eyes-on' work, and animals must be seen at least once a week, a significant task when numbers are high and herds are dispersed over a large, non-contiguous area. Junior managers are responsible for units of roughly 1 000 animals each, and three or four juniors work under one senior manager. Discipline, control and good networks must be in place or management will unravel, says Paul.

"At ZZZ there's no cross-subsidy. Every division has to budget independently and make a profit.

"Of course, we benefit by being part of the business, but that doesn't mean there can be any slackness in management."





Instilling good business practices into the country's young and upcoming farmers is vital if agriculture is to succeed. Stock farmers must know their costs and how to manage them, explains Paul.

'UPLIFTMENT STARTS WITH YOUR OWN GUYS'

At ZZZ, working towards individual strengths and close mentoring are very important.

"Tami Ramothwala is in charge of the show cattle section and has a gift for teaching. He has trained six junior stock managers," Paul says. "He's a knowledgeable stockman with years of experience, and can also work with people. Upliftment starts with

your own guys – we've done that since way back."

Senior manager Daniel Rampedi, who runs a commercial herd, is the go-to man at on-farm staff quarters because he has a firm hand and keeping order comes easily to him. Every manager works with a team of skilled labourers and has to be able to manage people as well as cattle.

TRANSFORMATION

Communal farmers own about 54% of South Africa's national herd, says Paul. Every year more land is taken up by farming and other activities, so it makes sense to farm with the best animal husbandry, breeding and resource utilisation strategies in place, always optimising the use of resources.

"The culture of the black South African cattle farmer

TOP: Workers assemble as they wait for their section leaders and managers to emerge from the daily management meeting.

ABOVE: From left: Stalin Hai Ngomani, a junior manager at ZZZ livestock division who started as an unskilled labourer in 2008; Tami Ramothwala, who has been with ZZZ for 18 years and is in charge of show cattle; and Daniel Rampedi, a senior manager who has worked at ZZZ for 24 years and runs a commercial herd.



Senior admin clerk, Pamela Matlou, in the vet supply storeroom. In keeping with ZZZ's no-frills approach, there is no excess here, rather an organised, easy-to-track supply of essentials.

FAST FACTS

- ZZZ sees disciplined training as integral to successful transformation.
- Three or four junior managers work under one senior manager.
- ZZZ's study group scheme aims to assist operating and aspirant farmers.

is to hold onto cattle, which have been seen as representing status in the community. Part of my mentorship in uplifting stockowners in rural communities is to make a convincing case for the cash flow benefits that can be derived through buying and selling cattle."

ZZZ advisors advocate that their study group members sell off F1 bulls and use that cash to build up their herds by buying in heifers and cows.

"Many communal stock farmers own Sanga-type cattle that are not up to commercial standards but we have to work with what we have," says Paul. "If you put a Pinzgauer or a PinZ'yl bull onto these animals you can wean a heavier calf and sell

it, either for the useful income it provides or to grow your herd by buying a better quality animal."

STUDY GROUP

In the drought of 2006, Paul was approached by civil engineer Element Mashai and his partner Elvis Ramolo, who owned a herd outside Polokwane. The two men came to Paul desperate for grazing.

"When the cows arrived they were in a bad state and I told them that they could not make any kind of living out of these cattle. I suggested that they sell the animals and start again with better quality cattle."

Element took Paul's advice and bought 10 heifers. This small group of animals has grown to 92 and in 2010 Element won SA Stud Book's Upcoming Farmer of the Year Award and a prize of three heifers from Unistel.

This success story got Paul thinking, and ZZZ's study group scheme was born. Designed

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← and steered by Paul and his colleague Isiah Ramothwala, the scheme aims to assist rural cattle farmers and aspirant stockowners. Through the scheme, participants are able to learn through action, and are able to purchase quality animals from ZZZ's stud herds.

Paul and Isiah recognised the fact that there are many people who want to own cattle but don't have the resources to do so. In one sense, the study groups allow for the realisation of a dream, while making it clear that business principles, common sense and hard work are part of making that dream work.

"It's a good deal for the members and shows the effort ZZZ puts into upliftment," says Paul.

One of the study group's rules is that every member must demonstrate fiscal prudence. This forms part of the agreement between members and the ZZZ cattle management division. Anyone can buy into the study group, but they buy cattle at market prices. The first principle is that this is not about making a quick return on investment.

"The buyer won't see a profit for about five years," says Paul. "You need to be committed when you come into this business, but once you've got going you can really do well."

The study group, which is actually made up of many different groups, now has 94 members who between them own about 2 000 cattle.

"There's no difference made between animal groups. Study group animals are treated exactly the same as any other animal in the ZZZ herd," says Paul.

A mandatory condition is that group members join SA Stud Book and

the Pinzgauer Breeders' Association (under whose auspices the PinZ'yl cattle society is run). Membership amounts to an annual cost of R995 for SA Stud Book and R1 200 for the society.

"It's through their efforts that stockowners can attend farmers' information days and everyone must recognise that this kind of learning is worth paying for. The high value of animals is acknowledged when they are registered with SA Stud Book," explains Paul.

THE VALUE OF SHOWS

Some study group members want to take part in shows. This is encouraged as a way of cultivating pride in one's animals, helping to generate the status culturally associated with owning cattle. Members with good stud Pinzgauer or PinZ'yl animals supply communities with better quality cattle.

'YOU NEED COMMITMENT IN THIS BUSINESS'

"Some of our owners take bulls to the cows in their communal herds for a season and then bring them back here where they will be looked after and where the animals are not at risk of sexually transmitted disease," says Paul.

He adds that production sales are a thing of the past for him because local black farmers in his area buy the excess bulls and cows.

"We do our marketing by taking cattle to farmers' days."

One study group member who had read a *Farmer's Weekly* article about investing in cattle drove some distance to look at ZZZ's stud animals. "After a family



ABOVE: The daily management meeting at ZZZ's livestock division is proof of transformation and black empowerment within the organisation.



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consultation, he bought animals and registered them in his daughters' names. We encourage members like this."

Paul, a senior breed selector, and ZZZ managing stockmen, junior selectors, make buyer selections.

COSTS

Study group members pay management and grazing fees of R240/month for a cow and calf, R180/month for an in-calf heifer, R120/month for an open heifer, and R120 for a weaned steer from eight months to 12 months. The charge for a mature bull is R300/month and for a young bull up to 24 months it is R200/month. These are attractive rates by any standards.

"An extensive herd of 2 000 cattle needs 20 000ha in this area," says Paul.

Prof Erik Holm, a well-known entomologist and sometime ZZZ advisor, says it's 'a hotel for cattle'. But at backpacker rates

these cattle are getting Ritz management. It's a simple yet delicate transformational process. ZZZ helps members by providing grazing and management at affordable rates. Members are subject to the standard risks that come with livestock farming, including animal mortality and pay for any vet costs incurred. Paul says that with the right support, there are many competent black cattlemen who can succeed in farming ventures.

"The challenge for me is to see how we can expand the breeder group and teach them to become good stockmen who in time will have their own farms and pass on their knowledge and the genetic quality of their cattle," he says.

"We're proud to sponsor the emerging guys. It's our contribution to rural upliftment."

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