

Goosing Innovation

Once upon a time there was a farmer named Ben who wasn't afraid to try new things. As a rule, farmers are pretty conservative. When all your life's savings are tied up in crops and livestock, both of which can be wiped out in a heartbeat by a plague, a drought, or insects, life seems pretty chancy all by itself. Most farmers don't want to make it chancier by doing something different. Farmer Ben was cautious, but he was always looking for a better way to do things. Folks who knew him said he was an innovative farmer, and they always said it with respect.

Farmer Ben had a goose named Mildred. Mildred lived in a fenced-in area of the barnyard, ate corn, and occasionally produced eggs. One day Farmer Ben added up how much he was spending on Mildred's corn and realized he was barely making enough money on her eggs to pay for the corn. "Maybe I'll let Mildred be a free-range goose" Farmer Ben thought. "That way she can find her own food. I think she'll still want to come back to her nest to lay her eggs, and if she doesn't I really haven't lost much." So he tore down the fence around Mildred's pen.

At first Mildred didn't know what to make of this. She lingered around the barnyard for a while, but then she waddled a little way to nibble on some grass. That brought her within sight of some more grass, and then she found a bug, and soon she discovered she could feed herself quite well. She went back to her nest at night, but every day she waddled off to find good things to eat.

One day Mildred found a little stream with cool water to drink and tasty water bugs to eat. There were also shiny flecks in the sand on the bottom of the creek. Geese need grit for their crops and the shiny flecks caught her eye, so Mildred scooped up the tiny flecks. The next day she saw more flecks, so she scraped them up too. Eventually these flecks pressed together in her crop and formed a lump that was too big to grind food, so it passed from Mildred the way geese pass all things they don't need. Farmer Ben found it near her nest. "Well what do you know?" he said. "Mildred laid a golden egg."

Farmer Ben sold the "egg" for a tidy sum, and a few months later Mildred presented him with another such gift. Soon word got out that Farmer Ben had a goose that laid golden eggs. One morning he looked out the window from his breakfast table and saw a BMW full of lawyers trundling up the lane to his farm. "We're from MegaFarm Industries" they said after carefully tiptoeing across the farmyard to his front door. "We want to discuss a merger."

The lawyers offered Farmer Ben an obscene amount of money to join MegaFarm. They also said they wanted him to stay on to manage the day to day operations of the farm. "After all" they said. "You're the reason this farm is so successful. Nobody knows how to run this farm better than you do. We'll just bring in a General Manager to help take some of the administrative load so you can focus on farming."

"What administrative load?" Farmer Ben asked as he tucked their check into the cigar box where he kept his money. "Seems to me I'm pretty much focused on farming as it is."

“Well,” said one of the lawyers as she eyed the cigar box with disdain. “We could help with your accounting. We’ll have to. MegaFarm is a publicly owned company. That means you’ll need to comply with a few rules you haven’t had to worry about in the past.”

“OSHA rules are something else we could help you with” said another lawyer, as he carefully examined his shoe. “I don’t think OSHA would approve of that manure next to your driveway.”

“Manure?” laughed Farmer Ben. “That ain’t had time to turn to manure yet. That’s just a pile of. . .”

“We’ll let you discuss that with the General Manager” the first lawyer interrupted.

The next morning the General Manager arrived, along with an army of accountants. The GM seemed to be a pretty nice guy, but the accountants were an infernal nuisance. They asked him for records of every dime he’d spent since fifth grade, and they kept talking about controls and safeguards. They set up a new procedure for him to apply for operating funds, which he had to justify based on anticipated returns. He applied for money to replace his broken irrigation pump, but the crops dried up before he got his business plan approved. The accountants did, however, approve the GM’s request for an expansion of the farmhouse to house the Quality Department, the Project Management Office, and the IT department. The IT department gave Farmer Ben a computer, something he’d never had before, and then protected it with a password so complicated he couldn’t remember it. The Quality department wanted him to write down everything he did so they could diagram it as a process. Then they looked for ways to eliminate waste, such as their plan to eliminate the need to clean the barn stalls by not feeding the cattle. The Project Management Office scheduled endless meetings where they tried to prioritize Farmer Ben’s projects. The debate as to whether milking cows or fertilizing crops was more important threatened to go on for days. Farmer Ben tried to point out that since the new accounting procedures had already ruined the crops it was essential to milk the cows, especially if they wanted to earn a little money before the new Quality procedures starved the livestock. This argument was shrugged off as being a temporary condition which had no bearing on the farm’s strategic priorities. Farmer Ben resigned his position as Chief of Operations shortly after that meeting. He took a tiny portion of the money MegaFarm had paid him and bought a new farm, where he continued to try out new ideas.

And Mildred? MegaFarm considered her to be the most valuable asset they had acquired through the merger so they took very good care of her. The first thing they did was to implement an asset protection plan by erecting a giant security fence around the entire farmyard. Of course, that fence kept Mildred in as effectively as it kept unauthorized people out, so Mildred would never again lay a golden egg. She was well fed, however, as the Quality Team had correctly deduced that a goose’s output was directly related to its input and they gave her as much corn as she wanted. Her only annoyance was the Director of Marketing, who had reams of market research showing gold was dropping in popularity while silver was rising. Other research showed people associated eggs with cholesterol, so the Marketing Director was forever haranguing her to lay silver pickles instead of golden eggs.

All in all, MegaFarms was pleased with its new acquisition. True, profits were down, but the General Manager was able to provide charts and graphs that showed they were doing well when compared to other farms which had dehydrated crops and starved livestock. Construction of the new dormitory for middle managers was on schedule, and both the Quality Office and the Project Management Office assured headquarters that they were finally beginning to turn things around. After the merger they had been horrified to discover just how disorganized and unbusinesslike the previous management team had been, but they now had a five year plan to eliminate waste and target expenditures toward the most profitable aspects of the enterprise. The only one who was disappointed was Jack, the CEO of MegaFarm, and he kept his disappointment to himself. He had an uneasy feeling that MegaFarm Industries was lacking in innovation, but every time he voiced this concern his staff buried him in PowerPoint slides that documented how well their Managing Innovation Reaps Excellence (MIRE) program was succeeding. Jack had acquired Ben's farm because it was reported to be the most innovative farm in the county and he hoped he could discover some "best practices" that he could point to and tell his staff "See? That's what I mean by innovation! Do that everywhere!" Sadly, the more his staff briefed him about Farmer Ben's operation the more it appeared to be no different from the thousands of other farms he owned. He began to look for another acquisition, one that might bring with it that illusive trait called innovation.