

CASE STUDY

AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

OPPORTUNITY OVERVIEW

North Iowa Cooperative (NIC) is a regionally focused cooperative service North Central Iowa. NIC had locations in four communities through 8 facilities and employ approximately 50 full-time employees. NIC has over \$80 million in yearly sales and operates primarily in the fertilizer, agronomy, seed, propane and feed spaces.

CLIENT OBJECTIVE

NIC has been a part of the North Central Iowa landscape for decades. Over time they have evolved to meet the changing customer needs and expectations. Recent changes include an investment in a new Agronomy facility, the centralization of services and implementation of technology solutions to manage orders and delivery needs.

North Iowa Cooperative is also committed to helping all of their employees develop. This includes a special focus on helping employees gain the knowledge and skills needed to appropriately demonstrate proper communication when communicating with customers & internal team members as well as helping leaders become better leaders.

TARGET AUDIENCE

- All North Iowa Cooperative employees including management, leaders and operations staff.

INTRATRRAIN SOLUTION

intRAtrain partnered with NIC to providing services, products, and expertise designed to create a culture that is “Reaching for Excellence.” This is achieved through employee engagement, creating motivated and productive employees with a commitment to enhancing the customer experience and overall customer satisfaction. Improving the quality of employee and customer interactions and their effectiveness improves the customer experience, improves customer loyalty, improves employee job satisfaction, and results in growth of unit sales and margins. The initial three-year plan includes a series of meetings, surveys, workshop, training and coaching sessions all designed to provide employees with the skills needed to work well together and serve their customers.

RESULTS

NIC began year one of the “Reaching for Excellence” program in late 2018-2019 with an employee survey designed to identify strengths and weaknesses related to communication at NIC. This included both internal communication with co-workers and management as well as external communication that impacts the farmers. Based on the results of that survey, intRAtrain customized its course “Deliver Great Ag Customer Service” to focus on the key areas of development as identified in the initial employee survey. In addition, all leaders and emerging leaders were trained on how to help resolve conflict, encourage communication, and achieve results. Group training sessions were held for both customer service and leadership, with coaching, reinforcement, and follow-up opportunities help after the initial training sessions. Additional development opportunities are planned to continue the development in year two and beyond.

CUSTOMER COMMENTS

We have grain; agronomy, which is fertilizer, crop protection products (herbicides, fungicides, insecticides); seed, propane, and feed. Change occurred in, and we needed to find a way to facilitate improved communication between the employees themselves and their supervisors

What we needed was something for our total employee group. We identified communication as a focus. One thing that came out in our preliminary work was that the external customers—our farmers—were noticing if there were internal issues. We needed to do a better job of presenting ourselves professionally to our farmers. I think we did a great job of mixing up the group. What I found was that people really opened up and were really good participants. It was very successful, and the employee group thought it was great. We would have follow-up to see if any of the leaders were having any communication problems. That was a big part of making it work.

I would say that I probably waited a bit too long to implement this kind of program. I should have probably done it just a bit quicker. If you feel that there is a need, go ahead and implement a program because it is healthy for the culture of our coop, and I feel that we made great strides. I think people are doing a better job controlling emotions and bringing issues out in the air, talking things out, working together as a team. We made great strides compared to a year ago. I discovered I have a great employee group, and they want to learn to do better, and this facilitated that.

Chuck Schafer, General Manager
North Iowa Cooperative.

