

68th Worshipful Company of Farmers

Advanced Course in Agricultural Business Management

Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, Gloucestershire

11th – 30th November 2018

Report by Helen Thomas, 2010 Nuffield Scholar



The Worshipful Company of Farmers



I was privileged to attend the 68th Advanced Course in Agricultural Business Management run by the Worshipful Company of Farmers in November 2018 and held at the Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester England. This was made possible by the generous sponsorship of Nuffield Australia, iTravel, Griffith, and the Worshipful Company of Farmers and for their assistance I am very grateful.

Overview

Together with a Dutchman and 16 UK farmers, I spent three weeks immersing myself in an intense study of how to improve our businesses.



Fellow participants in course 68, Nov 2018

We heard from an impressive array of speakers who challenged us to think globally, strategically, market better, and manage our resources, be it time, people or assets. Along the way we learnt lessons in leadership, stress management, environmental management, banking, accounting, growing businesses, growing staff, and life balance. The esteem in which the course is held was evidenced by the calibre of, and the distance many of the speakers travelled to speak to us. We were even visited by the Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Affairs Michael Gove, during a busy political week in which he was being touted as the replacement prime minister to Theresa May.

Pyschometric testing at the very beginning helped us in defining who we were so as to help us determine our values and what our management style and way of dealing with life was likely to be and where we could improve our outcomes.



Royal agricultural College, Cirencester, where the course was held

Quality speakers then helped us grasp a picture of where agriculture is heading so as to determine for ourselves where we wanted to go and how to get there. In between we worked on a number of case studies which incrementally built up our skills in analysing a business and finding solutions.

We finished on a challenging note to be good and effective leaders in our businesses and whatever else we were involved in - and to get ourselves a mentor to make sure we do.

Along the way we had lecture-style learning, panels, discussion groups, small group work, farm and business visits and various outings to vary the delivery style. And the food and accommodation alone was worth travelling to England for. Our outings included Cheltenham Racecourse, with an in depth look at how it was managed, London to hear an oration in honour of John Alliston, who ran the course for many years, Thatcher's Cider, Alvis Cheese and our case study farm.



Sampling cheese at Alvis Cheese factory

What we learnt was gathered together under the theme of defining our values.

The first thing in any business is determining your values. From your values you define your goals. It is then a process of aligning your business with those goals and determining how to achieve them.

This is aided by deciding what key performance indicators will be useful and monitoring them. It is important to “get everyone on the bus” so all members of the business are pulling together.

Good leadership helps. This requires courage, humility and adhering to values.

The gist of the Worshipful Company of Farmers Advanced Course in Agricultural Business Management was not new to any of the participants. The method of delivery and the quality of the speakers ensured the message hit home, though, and in greater depth.

Just as in Nuffield, learning from the other participants was a huge part of the growth. I was the only female amongst a terrific group of true English gentlemen – and one Dutchman – with whom I hope to remain friends for life. We were encouraged to be accountable to each other. Many of the other participants were managing much larger businesses than mine and I found them a valuable resource for many things, but particularly staff management.

One thing the Worshipful Company of Farmers does differently to Nuffield is ensures before the course ends, the reunion is already organised. In our case the next 9 years’ worth! As the real value to my business is likely to be the mentoring from, and accountability to, the rest of the group on an ongoing basis, I value this cohesion, even if I don’t get to two reunions a year in person! (I will join in via skype, though)



Helen in the room where much of the course work was held

Altogether, I valued the experience immensely and am very grateful to Nuffield, The Worshipful Company of Farmers and iTravel, Griffith, for the opportunity to attend – not forgetting my husband Wayne for holding the fort for a month so I could leave the farm.

The opportunity to attend the course was timely as we have been in the process of restructuring our business. Since returning home, Wayne and I have been working hard on goal re-alignment and I am confident the course will have a big impact on our future direction.

When I did my Nuffield, there was no Whatsapp. I now get up to 50 messages a day from the rest of the group offering challenge and suggestions to each other, along with many laughs.

Helen Thomas

November 2018 Group

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