



## Look After Yourself

Dylan and Sheree Ditchfield have experienced the ups and downs of farming in recent years and emerged with a fresh take on life, farming and managing stress.

Paradise Valley, in Wendonside, Southland is aptly named – a great place to farm and live.

“The soil type here suits all weather. There’s a thick base of topsoil – very fertile, holds moisture well and has good properties for growing. And beneath it, clay and gravel, which means it’s also free draining,” says Dylan.

The Ditchfields farm 480 cows on a 155 milking platform. The couple, who came down from the Bay of Plenty in 1996, have never regretted shifting south.

“We love this community and what Southland brings. It’s what life used to be up north 20 years ago – that real sense of community. We’re in the wops a bit, but we love that. The quiet and being by ourselves.

“There was heaps of opportunity when we moved here. We loved the challenge of things and our business quickly grew two or threefold. We were successful but we worked really hard.”

### Growth, then tough times

The couple started a family and enjoyed good times and spectacular business growth for a number of years. But things got tricky when the recession hit.

“Before the recession, we’d expanded extensively, accumulated a lot of debt and that put us in a really hard space. To cut a long story short, we had to turn our business on its head.”

The stress took a toll on Dylan’s health and well-being.

“I got to the point where I’d hit the ceiling. I couldn’t let go, I never saw my family and my wellbeing became a real issue.”

The experience made him re-examine all aspects of his business and life.

### Taking stock

His key insight was that during his years of success, he had neglected the most important aspects of his business – himself and his family.

“Typically in our industry, the work ethic is high. We’re out there to progress and grow our business. That’s naturally how things go. And for me, it was at the expense of myself, my family, our business, our people.”





**We had to put ourselves and our people first.** DYLAN DITCHFIELD

"The focus on growing wealth and expanding has become ingrained in our industry over the last few generations. It's addictive. The more you get, the more you want. The more opportunities you see, the more you want to dive in. But you can get badly caught out. If you haven't got the tools and skills to manage your way through, you're vulnerable."

Those tough times drove Dylan and Sheree to find a healthier and more sustainable business model.

"We had to come up with a better vision and purpose for our business. We had to ask ourselves, why are we doing what we're doing? If your family's not right, you have to ask yourself the question, 'why have you got into farming in the first place?'"

"Stepping back and taking a 'helicopter' view, helped us make better choices in business, as well as personally."

Change meant a fundamental shift in approach and priorities.

## Get the help you need

First, the Ditchfields sought outside advice. They set up an advisory board that allowed them to tap into business and financial expertise as required. Many top-performing farms employ the same model.

"My advice to anyone who finds themselves in my situation is get mentors. Surround yourself with people who have been through it all before," says Dylan.

## Have faith in those you hire

Next they lightened their workload, handing over the day-to-day running of the farm.

"Now we operate with a manager, a 2 IC, an assistant and some casual staff. Sheree and I are involved in the farm's governance, the oversight and organisation of operations, but I don't physically milk the cows or have anything to do with the day-to-day running of it," he says.

"We've transitioned our business. Our focus is now on our people, coaching them to drive our business and get the performance. Our philosophy is that if we fix the people side of our business, everything else follows," says Dylan.

## Put yourself in the business plan

With more time on his hands, Dylan made actively improving his own health and wellbeing his number one priority.

He now schedules regular exercise and breaks off the farm and makes sure he eats and sleeps well so he has the energy and freshness to make good decisions.

“First and foremost, farming well is about taking care of yourself. By taking better care of yourself, you are taking better care of your partner, your family and your business. If you’re not right, nothing else will go right.”

“Resilience in farming is all about having the energy to be the best you can be. I now devote around a third of my week to looking after my wellbeing.”

## Get social, stay connected

The Ditchfields also made an effort to simply enjoy life more, get off the farm and out into the community.

“Our community is close, so there’s plenty of opportunity to mix, whether it’s the pub or social sporting events. But you have to get out your door and go and get involved. That’s vital.”

## Spreading the message

Transforming their business has been such a rewarding experience, that Dylan and Sheree recently began a new business venture – Farming to Freedom – offering workshops for other dairying couples in the region. Their dream is to play a part in reshaping the dairy industry.

“We wanted to give something back. Basically, we were in a really hard space and when we got out of it, we thought everyone else already knew this stuff, but they didn’t. We realised very few people talked about these things and we needed to help.”

“We’re targeting young couples in the dairy business. Many of them are hurting financially, but they’ve had the courage to come. It’s been inspirational working with them and seeing the penny drop and their attitudes change.”

“What you see develop,” says Sheree, “is a kind of calm in the storm, because people have an enduring sense of purpose that can sustain them year in, year out.”

## It’s all in ‘the why’

It took the Ditchfields a few years to make their transition, but they’ve arrived in a great space.

“It’s all in the ‘why,’” explains Dylan. “We understand why we are farming now. Too many farmers are just hooked on money, cows and grass.”

“For years and years we measured success purely according to financial targets and performance. But it wasn’t sustainable. That was the missing piece of the puzzle. We had to put ourselves and our people first. What we discovered is that we were in a very good position to have a better life if we really wanted to.” ■

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