



Neither Chicken, nor Egg

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Farmer Jan is an avid cyclist¹. This pastime is not only his daily anti-stress activity because it also gives him a chance to think quietly about his farm. Normally, while biking he finds peace, but not today. Today his nervousness increases with every cycle. It is not going well with his farm and he has no idea how to solve the problem.

A few years ago, he was proud of his chicken farm. Always, when he came home from his bike ride, his faithful dog Sam welcomed him. Sam guarded the terrain and warned him when visitors were on the premises. While his barking friend was getting old, he still did excellent work.

In addition, Pi, his independent cat, greeted him when he came home, even though it was from the roof of the barn. Pi could suddenly appear unexpectedly or sometimes he just walked gracefully between the free-running chickens. However, mostly he slept somewhere in the hay.

Farmer Jan was also proud of his chickens. His chickens were doing what chickens have to do and they, all cackling laid large, flavourful eggs. His eggs - although he had never produced one himself, he regarded them as his eggs - were praised throughout the surrounding area. His chickens were his babies. Even that old chicken, although she laid no more eggs, he allowed to run around in the yard and pick up grains. His colleagues would already have served that old chicken as the main dish. Not him!

His rooster was a real prized animal. Large, graceful and strong. He never laid an egg, but he was part of the happy family.

A farm in perfect harmony. And it made good money for Farmer Jan.

However, that was until a few months ago when Farmer Jan had to conclude that the prices for chicken food were increasing too fast, as well as those for energy. This increase in costs resulted in shrinking profits from selling his eggs, so he decided to freeze the expenses and thus to buy less and less food for his chickens. Farmer Jan noted to his surprise that unlike before, his flock rarely wasted food and the hens were still laying as many eggs as before his budgetary measures. Freezing the expenses, he concluded, was therefore a wise decision.

A blessing in disguise came when, after a good life, Sam went quietly away. A sad event, but the positive side was that Farmer Jan could save on dog food. The presence of Pi was somewhat necessary by the potential presence of rats and mice. A cat was indeed the best remedy against these pests. However, the lazy days of sleeping in hay for Pi

¹ This story is based on a text written by my former boss, COL Jan Lumbeek, after one of his daily bike rides.

were over. From now on, he was on a diet of less free food. When hungry, he simply had to catch mice.

However, the savings in food proved still not sufficient. After a while, the rooster had to put food to the table. Literally. He, with no added value to the egg production, finished as a main course of the family meal.

Production remained stable and Farmer Jan was satisfied. But only for a short time. The success of his measures, as well as additional rising prices, stimulated him to reduce the amount of food even further. And one more time, and once more, and another one, until he suddenly noticed that the production of eggs was unmistakably declining. Appreciating his former successes, he contributed this decline to the detrimental weather conditions, or to pure chance.

After a few weeks he had to admit that indeed some hens were producing fewer eggs and that this had nothing to do with the weather conditions. Hot or cold, dry or wet ... production was going down. His only conclusion was foul play and bad will by the chickens, so he decided to give them even less to eat. He would teach them a lesson. Fewer eggs, less food. Now he noticed that some of the chickens died. As a result, he had to purchase more new chickens, but he had no money. Farmer Jan then decided to go one step further. A productive life as a chicken was no reason to get a free retirement. No eggs, no food. A simple rule for everyone - almost everyone because Farmer Jan thought that that rule did not apply to him. Older, unproductive hens were still allowed at the farm, but they got no food.

It may seem like the right rule, but even this measure was a failure because it could not compensate for the dying hens. The few new hens he could buy did not survive long, or simply disappeared. As for his profits, those were non-existent and, moreover, the production had shrunk to its lowest level. He did not even touch the production levels of the old days. The question whether it would be better to stop farming was floating around in his head. He was in doubt, because if he stopped, he would never get back his investments. On the other hand, if he would buy a bunch of new, more productive chickens, he was not sure about the return on investment. On top of that, the new ones might not stay alive long enough.

Misery! Just more savings looked like the only way out. That was indeed the miracle solution a few months ago. So why not now? More savings was the final decision of Farmer Jan that day as he stepped off his bike and was greeted by neither Sam, nor Pi, nor his chickens...

However, someone did greet him: he came across his neighbour, also a chicken farmer. His neighbour saw immediately that something was out-of-the-ordinary. Jan was always in a good mood, but not this time.

Unlike our Farmer Jan, the neighbour-farmer had not made any rash savings, but had considered his farm as one complete, interconnected system. Dogs, cats, roosters and chickens, even the farmer himself, were all inextricably linked in the achievement of a healthy egg production. Take away one link and the full capacity would fall apart. It was

therefore an art to maintain a balance, and yet to survive in a changing environment. Although more difficult than simply applying budgetary measures, in the mind of the neighbour, there was no other way.

A dog keeps the fox and other predators away. Overnight, a well-fed and healthy cat catches mice and rats that are otherwise stealing fresh eggs and the food for the chickens. A rooster ensures a fair distribution of the food so that the hens do not hurt each other in fights over food and he helps keep the hens healthy. The older, 'non-productive' hens clean up wasted food and other kinds of waste, preventing outbreaks of disease and the attraction of pests. Finally, the farmer ensures harmony and management. The whole system and everyone in it takes care that the hens can do what they should do in a peaceful environment.

Therefore, even as the dog, cat, rooster... and farmer do not produce any eggs, they are necessary for a good production. Everything must be in balance. And had Farmer Jan, after observing the significant decline in egg production, decided to increase the amount of food, he would, by gradually increasing the amount, be able to determine the point when food (input) and egg production (output) are optimal and most profitable. The body of a chicken stops automatically producing eggs for lack of food, but that does not mean that the chicken dies².

² Employees stop working for lack of motivation, but that does not mean that they will leave the organisation.