

**Removing Barriers  
To Communication  
In The Dairy Farm  
Business**

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# Removing Barriers To Communication In The Dairy Farm Business

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Communication plays a major role in employer-employee relationships on dairy farms. It also affects the relationships among family members on the management team. Although effective communication can not guarantee success of a dairy farm business, its absence almost always assures problems. The problems may soon become apparent or they may linger as a gnawing problem for years.

More specifically, communication influences the effectiveness of the hiring and training of employees, motivation of employees, providing daily instructions, performance evaluations and the handling of discipline problems. These are the obvious roles of communication. Communication also affects the willingness of employees to provide useful suggestions. In fact, for employees to evolve from "workers" to "working managers" requires effective communication between supervisors and employees.

Employees typically are hesitant to state their goals, their concerns and their disappointments. Of course, an employee may be a complainer and share views to the point a supervisor silently begs for less "communication." Much more common is the need to better understand what an employee is "really thinking."

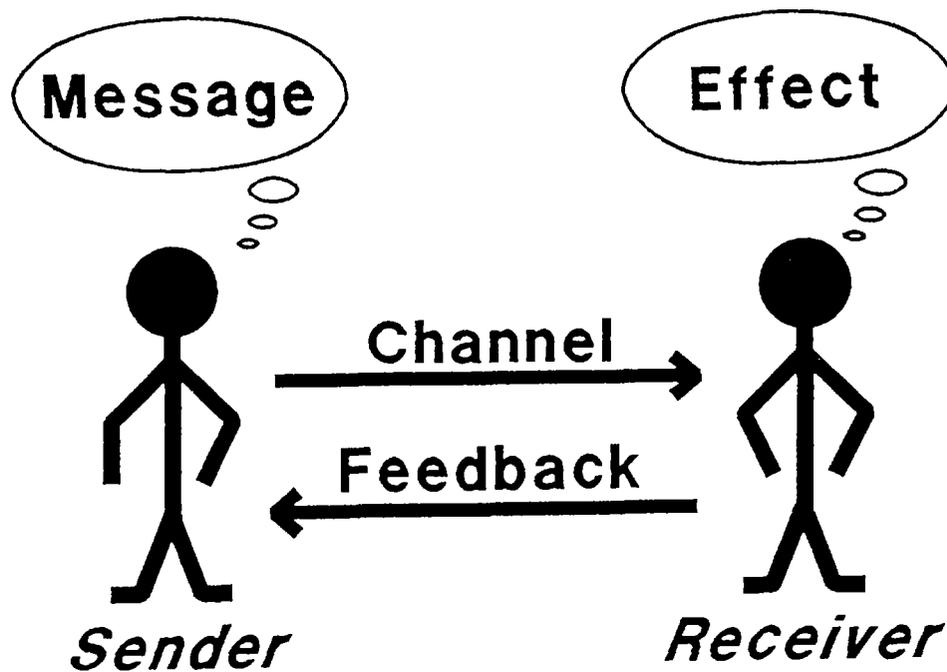
This paper is about improving communication skills. Removing barriers to communication is one of the easiest ways to improve communication. Removing these barriers starts with an understanding of a communication model. One way to improve communication is to think about it. This paper is designed to help dairy farm managers think about their own communication skills and the way communication is done day-to-day back home.

## Communication Model

The model in Figure 1 identifies the major components in the communication process. The process starts with a sender who has a message for a receiver. Two or more people are always involved in communication. The sender has the responsibility for the message.

The sender's message travels to the receiver through one or more channels chosen by the sender. The channels may be verbal or non-verbal. They may involve only one of the senses, hearing for example, or they may involve all five of the senses: hearing, sight, touch, smell, and taste. Non-verbal communication, popularly referred to as body language, relies primarily on seeing rather than hearing.

Figure 1. Communication Model



The sending of a message by an appropriate channel to a receiver appears to have completed the communication process or at least the sender's responsibility. Not so! After sending the message, the sender becomes a receiver and the receiver becomes a sender through the process of feedback. Feedback is the receiver's response to the attempt by the sender to send the message. Feedback is the key to determination by the sender of whether or not the message has been received in the intended form. Feedback involves choice of channel by the receiver of the original message. The channel for feedback may be quite different from the original channel chosen by the sender. A puzzled look may be the feedback to what the sender considered a perfectly clear oral instruction.

Effect on the receiver completes the communication process. Effective communication is the original sender having the desired effect on the receiver. Communication at its best minimizes misunderstanding between sender and receiver. The sender can not transplant a message or idea. Ineffective communication means there was no effect on the receiver or the effect was unexpected, undesired and/or unknown to the sender.

This simplified version of a complex process can be a powerful tool for thinking about one's communication skills, diagnosing communication problems and developing plans for improvement of communication. The good news about communication is that improvement is almost always possible. The bad news is that perfection in communication escapes everyone.

#### **Barriers to Communication**

Problems with any one of the components of the communication model can become a barrier to communication. These barriers suggest opportunities for improving communication

1. **Muddled messages.** Effective communication starts with a clear message. Contrast these two messages: "Please be here about 7:00 tomorrow morning." "Please be here at 7:00 tomorrow morning." The one word difference makes the first message muddled and the second message clear.

Muddled messages are a barrier to communication because the receiver is left unclear about the intent of the sender. Muddled messages have many causes. The sender may be confused in his or her thinking. The message may be little more than a vague idea. The problem may be semantics, e.g., note this muddled newspaper ad: "Dog for sale. Will eat anything. Especially likes children. Call 888-3599 for more information."

Feedback from the receiver is the best way for a sender to be sure that the message is clear rather than muddled. Clarifying muddled messages is the responsibility of the sender. The sender hoping the receiver will figure out what was really met does little to remove this barrier to communication.

2. **Stereotyping.** Stereotyping causes us to typify a person, a group, an event or a thing on oversimplified conceptions, beliefs, or opinions. Thus, basketball players can be typed as tall, green equipment as better than red equipment, football linemen as dumb, Ford as better than Chevrolet, Vikings as handsome, and people raised on dairy farms as interested in cows. Stereotyping can substitute for thinking, analysis and open mindedness to a new situation.

Stereotyping is a barrier to communication when it causes people to act as if they already know the message that is coming from the sender or worse, as if no message is necessary because "everybody already knows." Both senders and listeners should continuously look for and address thinking, conclusions and actions based on stereotypes.

3. **Wrong channel.** "Good morning." A oral channel for this message is highly appropriate. Writing good morning on a chalk board in the machine shed is less effective than a warm oral greeting. On the other hand, a detailed request to a contractor for construction of a milking parlor should be in writing, i.e., non-oral. A long conversation between a dairy farmer and a contractor about the milking parlor construction, with neither taking notes, surely will result in confusion and misunderstanding. These simple examples illustrate how the wrong channel can be a barrier to communication.

Variation of channels helps the receiver understand the nature and importance of a message. Using a training video on cleaning milking equipment helps new employees grasp the importance placed on quality milk. A written disciplinary warning for tardiness emphasizes to the employee that the problem is serious. A birthday card to an employee's spouse is more sincere than a request to the employee to say "Happy Birthday" to the spouse.

Simple rules for selection of a channel cause more problems than they solve. In choice of a channel, the sender needs to be sensitive to such things as the complexity of the message (good morning versus a construction contract); the consequences of a misunderstanding (medication for a sick animal versus a guess about tomorrow's weather); knowledge, skills and abilities of the receiver (a new employee versus a partner in the business); and immediacy of action to be taken from the message (instructions for this morning's work versus a plan of work for 1992).

4. **Language.** Words are not reality. Words as the sender understands them are combined with the perceptions of those words by the receiver. Language represents only part of the whole. We fill in the rest with perceptions. Trying to understand a foreign language easily demonstrates words not being reality. Being "foreign" is not limited to the language of another country. It can

be the language of another farm. The Gerken house may be where the Browns now live. The green goose may be a trailer painted red long after it was given the name green goose. A brassy day may say much about temperature and little about color.

Each new employee needs to be taught the language of the farm. Until the farm's language is learned, it can be as much a barrier to communication as a foreign language.

5. Lack of feedback. Feedback is the mirror of communication. Feedback mirrors what the sender has sent. Feedback is the receiver sending back to the sender the message as perceived. Without feedback, communication is one-way.

Feedback happens in a variety of ways. Asking a person to repeat what has been said, e.g., repeat instructions, is a very direct way of getting feedback. Feedback may be as subtle as a stare, a puzzled look, a nod, or failure to ask any questions after complicated instructions have been given. Both sender and receiver can play an active role in using feedback to make communication truly two-way.

Feedback should be helpful rather than hurtful. Prompt feedback is more effective than feedback saved up until the "right" moment. Feedback should deal in specifics rather than generalities. Approach feedback as a problem in perception rather than a problem of discovering the facts.

6. Poor listening skills. Listening is difficult. A typical speaker says about 125 words per minute. The typical listener can receive 400-600 words per minute. Thus, about 75 percent of listening time is free time. The free time often sidetracks the listener. The solution is to be an active rather than passive listener.

One important listening skill is to be prepared to listen. Tune out thoughts about other people and other problems. Search for meaning in what the person is saying. A mental outline or summary of key thoughts can be very helpful. Avoid interrupting the speaker. Shut up is a useful listening guideline. Shut up some more is a useful extension of this guideline. Withhold evaluation and judgement until the other person has finished with the message. A premature frown, shaking of the head, or bored look by the listener can easily convince the other person there is no reason to elaborate or try again to communicate his or her excellent idea.

The most important active listening skill is to provide feedback. Ask questions. Nod in agreement. Look the person straight in the eye. Lean forward. Be an animated listener. Focus on what is being said. Repeat key points.

Active listening is particularly important in dealing with an angry person. Encouraging the person to speak, i.e., to vent feelings, is essential to establishing communication with an angry person. Repeat what the person has said. Ask questions to encourage the person to say again what he or she seemed most anxious to say in the first place. An angry person will not start listening until they have "cooled" down. Telling an angry person to "cool" down usually has little value. Getting angry with an angry person just assures that there are now two people not listening to what the other is saying.

7. Interruptions. A dairy farm is a lively place. Few days are routine. Long periods of calm and quiet rarely interrupt the usual hectic pace. In this environment, conversations, meetings, instructions and even casual talk about last night's game are likely to be interrupted. The interruptions may be due to something more pressing, rudeness, lack of privacy for discussion, a drop-in visitor, an emergency, or even the curiosity of someone else wanting to know what two other people are talking about.

Regardless of the cause, interruptions are a barrier to communication. In the extreme, there is a reluctance of employees and family members even to attempt discussion with a manager because of the near certainty that the conversation will be interrupted. Less extreme but nevertheless serious is the problem of incomplete instructions because someone came by with a pressing question.

8. **Physical distractions.** Physical distractions are the physical things that get in the way of communication. Examples of such things include the telephone, a pick-up truck door, a desk, an uncomfortable meeting place, and noise.

These physical distractions are common on dairy farms. If the phone rings, the tendency is to answer it even if the caller is interrupting a very important or even delicate conversation. A supervisor may give instructions from the driver's seat of a pick-up truck. Talking through an open window and down to an employee makes the truck door a barrier. A person sitting behind a desk, especially if sitting in a large chair, talking across the desk is talking from behind a physical barrier. Two people talking facing each other without a desk or truck-door between them have a much more open and personal sense of communication. Uncomfortable meeting places may include a place on the farm that is too hot or too cold. Another example is a meeting room with uncomfortable chairs that soon cause people to want to stand even if it means cutting short the discussion. Noise is a physical distraction simply because it is hard to concentrate on a conversation if hearing is difficult.

### **Facilitating Communication**

In addition to removal of specific barriers to communication, the following general guidelines may also facilitate communication:

1. **Have a positive attitude about communication.** Defensiveness interferes with communication.
2. **Work at improving communication skills.** It takes knowledge and work. The communication model and discussion of barriers to communication provide the necessary knowledge. This increased awareness of the potential for improving communication is the first step to better communication.
3. **Include communication as a skill to be evaluated along with all the other skills in each person's job description.** Help other people improve their communication skills by helping them understand their communication problems.
4. **Make communication goal oriented.** Relational goals come first and pave the way for other goals. When the sender and receiver have a good relationship, they are much more likely to accomplish their communication goals.
5. **Approach communication as a creative process rather than simply part of the chore of working with people.** Experiment with communication alternatives. What works with one person may not work well with another person. Vary channels, listening techniques, and feedback techniques.

**6. Accept the reality of miscommunication. The best communicators fail to have perfect communication. They accept miscommunication and work to minimize its negative impacts.**

### **Summary**

Communication is at the heart of many interpersonal problems faced by dairy farm managers. Understanding the communication process and then working at improvement provide managers a recipe for becoming more effective communicators. Knowing the common barriers to communication on dairy farms is the first step to minimizing their impact. Managers can reflect on how they are doing and make use of the ideas presented in this paper. When taking stock of how well you are doing as a manager, first ask yourself and others how well you are doing as a communicator.

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