

# Labor Management Roundtable: Moving The Dairy Industry Into The 21st Century

**M**oving the dairy industry into the 21st century will be a challenge that all dairy farmers will face in the near future. How labor on dairy farms will relate with management will be even more critical in the future. All of us will need to be able to think outside of the box with innovative and new ideas with our employees as well as our management teams.

Supervising people will be an important challenge for us in the future. Building more productivity and moral, getting things done on time and financially on target. How will owners manage conflict effectively and at the same time still give easy instructions to follow with all enterprises on your dairy farm. How do we delegate and get more done and be cost effective in doing that? These will be issues as we move our industry into the 21st century.

Boosting the moral and energy of your farm employees will only come with better means of communication and being able to try new and innovative ideas on your farm. Overcoming employees' resistance to change will be the ultimate satisfaction to everyone's operation.

In this roundtable we have challenged four individuals to give us some ideas that will help us all formulate new ways of thinking about labor management into the future:

- **Tina Wright**, Head Milker  
Fessenden Farms, King Farry, NY
- **George Segura**, Manager  
"Big Sky" and "Bright Star" dairies  
and a heifer facility, Mesquite, NM.
- **Mike Veeman**, Partner/Owner  
Veeman Dairy, Loveland, CO.
- **Tom Thompson**, Partner/Owner  
Stotz Dairy, Buckeye, AZ.

**Question #1: Give one example of a change you or your operation have made this past year in regard to labor/manage-**

**ment that has been successful.**

**Wright:** As our dairy has expanded from 300 to 400 milking cows (soon to be 500), Fessenden Farms has hired more part-time labor, significantly relief milkers. Previously, relief milking was done mostly by full-time milkers doubling up on their weekend shifts. Hiring and keep part-time help can be tougher than running a farm with full-timers only. The very nature of part-time and relief work can mean more turnover and schedule juggling. On our farm, I think we're being challenged to tighten our procedures and increase communication because relief people often come on the job site "cold" and lack the full-time worker's luxury of knowing what's going on day-to-day.

**Segura:** We really haven't had any major changes in our operation or in management. I have good communication with all of my employees and I try to take care of any problems as they occur so as to keep things running smoothly.

**Veeman:** During the last year we have started cross training several of our employees. The employees enjoy it and seem interested in learning a different job. It is easy to become very specialized on a large commercial dairy. When an employee does not show up for work, it has the potential of disrupting the work day. When employees have been cross trained it allows flexibility in scheduling and it turns potentially chaotic situations into minor adjustments. Cross training is a form of risk management. It allows you to plan for the inevitable and manage labor versus reacting to it.

**Thompson:** In the past, the night milkers were supervised by the herdsman for their respective barn. That arrangement required special effort for the herdsman to supervise and communicate with these employees, since these milkers arrived after the two herdsman finished their days and left before the herdsman started their next shift. Furthermore, if the milkers had problems in the middle of the night, the herdsman



would be summoned to the barn during his rest period making his life less enjoyable. To alleviate this situation we shifted the responsibility for these employees to the night herdsman. His job duties now include supervising both night crews of milkers. Since his work schedule is concurrent with the night milkers, he is available to routinely communicate and help facilitate problems that they might need assistance with.

**Question 2: How do employees get involved with the problem-solving process on your farm?**

**Wright:** At Fessenden Farms, workers are individually engaged by the owners to solve problems as they arise. John, the partner who "runs the cows," asks for our input around milk quality and other problems. Meetings are rare, though John and the herdsman confer frequently. The management style is strongly from the top. The strength of this style is efficiency and focus. We don't spend a lot of time chatting or passing the buck on responsibility. A weakness of this style is that employees are reluctant to initiate discussion or stick their necks out on possibly contentious issues.

**Segura:** When an employee encounters a problem that is beyond his control, he notifies the herdsman who in turn brings it to my attention whether or not it was taken care of. In this manner we are all aware of what happened and can handle the problem should it happen again. Most problems are handled with team effort.

**Veeman:** Only those persons who have responsibility, capability and concerns for our interests are put in a position of having regular input into the problem solving process. When we meet with these lead employees and discuss the projects we are going to schedule for the day, we weigh their input heavily. They are the ones working directly with the specific situation and they are responsible for the success of the particular tasks. During our worker training sessions we open up the discussions to everyone. We encourage open communication and ask for input. When the employees see us acting upon their input it is a valuable motivational tool and it encourages them to stay involved.

**Thompson:** We try to involve every knowledgeable employee when we have a problem on the dairy. This is accomplished by informal discussions as well as through organized employee meetings. Our consultants are also involved with this process. Sometimes we ask a specific employee or team of employees to troubleshoot an area that we are having problems with.

**Question 3: language barriers and cultural differences can present unique challenges with labor/management. How do you handle these challenges?**

**Wright:** Leadership from above is the first important ingredient in handling the challenges that language barriers and cultural differences provide. Diplomacy, charisma and sensitive social politics are all elements of leadership that management must use to promote a workplace that welcomes diversity. Since I've heard many viciously racist, anti-Semitic and otherwise prejudiced remarks in my years in the industry, I'd like to see management make clear to new employees at orientation that their farm tolerates no prejudice on the job. We should be clear and direct in opposing behavior and speech such as sexual harassment, violence, threats and put-downs on a racial, ethnic or religious nature. We have to mean what we say and lead by example. Successful dairy farm crews can be a varied bunch. We don't have to go to the same church, belong to the same political party or even be fans of the NASCAR driver. Fessenden Farms is not especially diverse in its workforce, though women have worked there! But the owners do foster a professional environment, somewhat impersonal, where the work comes first. This is a positive climate for diversity. And diversity leads to more diversity. On larger crews, it helps if you're not the only oddball... the only woman, the only black, the only Hispanic... it helps even if you don't like the other oddballs! Dairy farms which can successfully include employees from many walks of life will benefit from a larger recruiting circle.

**Segura:** Because I am bilingual, I am able to communicate well with all of my employees without difficulty.

**Veeman:** The majority of our employees are Hispanic. We handle the language barriers in two ways. First, our senior lead employees are bilingual and do all the translation. Second, as owners and managers it is important that we are able to communicate with our employees, therefore we study basic Spanish ourselves. We also need to understand that many of our employees have family in Mexico. In the Spanish culture, family is very important. That is why many of our employees return home on a regular basis. We have to make adjustments for this seasonal type of employment. We have also found that it is important that we are present when our lead employees are addressing a group of employees. This shows the entire workforce that management is serious about backing up supervisors and any questions can

be handled immediately.

**Thompson:** Every manager must speak the language of the employees that he directly supervises. We utilize the abilities of bilingual employees as needed. Every written communication is published in English and Spanish. Educational programs are conducted in either a bilingual format or as two separate classes. Hispanic managers are regularly consulted about how new programs or policies will be received from a cultural viewpoint. An English speaking class is offered weekly to employees and their spouses to help them assimilate into the society that they have chosen to migrate to.

**Question 4: Discuss the hiring process on your farm. Do your employees have proper training, timely initiation periods, and/or a probation period?**

**Wright:** Fessenden Farms is better than average on training, probationary periods and so on. I'm not sure how it's going with the recently hired part-time milkers, but my training as a milker was very good. A young man, only 17 years old, trained me very professionally. Some of my other instruction, around vaccinations for example, was less thorough and may not have sufficed for a less experienced employee. Though I'm not part of the hiring process, I feel that Fessenden's, like most expanding businesses, will need to fine tune job descriptions and training. Many procedures are written down. More could be. More farmers today are compiling employee procedures and otherwise formulating policy, instead of just winging it.

**Segura:** We accept applications for employment during regular working hours. These applications are kept on file and are referred to as employees are needed. They are then hired and given very basic training and a two-month probation period. Once this probation period is completed, they are given further training for a permanent position.

**Veeman:** All perspective employees are interviewed and references are checked. All new employees receive a basic initiation briefing. During that initiation we collect and copy all needed documents. We review the pay schedule, quality bonus program, vacations and basic job expectations. If the employee is Spanish speaking, an interpreter is present. Our initial training period lasts almost one week. Senior employees do the training. After the initial training period we will review the

employee and follow-up with additional training if needed. All employees are subject to a three month probation period.

**Thompson:** 4 -Our management team aggressively recruits for all new positions or openings. The goal is to encourage as many qualified candidates as possible to apply for every opening. This is accomplished by placing ads, posting in-house job opportunity bulletins, visiting with other dairymen, consultants, and extension agents, and keeping a current list of job applicants. Since the dairy prefers to promote from within, many new employees start in a trainee position and previous dairy experience is not required. There are two objectives that we try to accomplish during the process of interviewing all top candidates. First, we try to convince the candidate why they should want to work with us. Second, we try to identify the most ideal person for the position. Personal and previous work references are thoroughly checked out. Once the position is filled we start our educational process. We start by providing a complete job description to the employee. With some positions a video tape presentation of the job he will be performing is viewed. Then the new employee is placed with an existing employee who is empowered to show the new employee how to do the job. After sufficient time watching the trainer, the new employee is encouraged to work alongside the trainer. Eventually the trainer stands back and watches the new employee perform the job by himself. We find it beneficial to not only show how the job needs to be done, but also why it needs to be done and the implications if the job is not done correctly. This process can take one to three weeks depending on position, previous work experience, immediacy to fill the position, and the abilities of the individuals involved. During this orientation period we indoctrinate the new employee with information about our dairy, our philosophies, and potential career paths the employee can take while employed with us. Follow-up training is provided after the employee has been in the new position for awhile. Since all employees are hired at will, no probation periods are necessary.

**LABOR MANAGEMENT ROUNDTABLE  
MOVING THE DAIRY INDUSTRY  
INTO THE 21ST CENTURY  
By George Segura, Manager  
Big Sky and Bright Star Dairies**



---

**and Heifer Facility, Mesquite, NM**

I've been around dairy cattle all my life. My father worked on a dairy farm in California and that's where I grew up. I learned a lot from my father just be being around him on the dairy as he treated and bred cows. I was very eager to learn anything and everything about the dairy and was always nearby asking questions.

In 1973 we moved to New Mexico and lived on the dairy where my father worked. I was hired at a young age to do light chores around the dairy such as feeding calves and helping keep the dairy clean. As time passed my duties and responsibilities increased. I learned how to milk, detect sick cows, treat them and pull calves.

I always enjoyed working at the dairy, and I think my enthusiasm made my job easier. The dairy was a challenge for me. There was something different to learn everyday. My job became even more challenging when I learned how to heat-detect and breed. Soon after I was given the opportunity to be a Herdsman, and with this position came other responsibilities and duties such as proper maintenance of equipment and managing some of the employees.

I was offered a management position on a somewhat small dairy that would be quickly expanding. I didn't hesitate to accept the new job since I had different ideas as far as employee management and procedures. This was my opportunity to be able to do things my way. I have always had good support from my employer and am able to try new things and give my opinion about important matters.

Currently, I am managing two dairies and a heifer feedlot. I have approximately 40 employees under my supervision. I have learned a lot about employee management from my boss. He really stresses good communication with all employees and I think this is what makes business run smoothly. His thought is to treat a person the way you would like to be treated.

I continue to enjoy my work and life on the dairy. I am grateful to be given the opportunity to do what I like best, dairying.

**LABOR MANAGEMENT:  
THE STOTZ DAIRY PERSPECTIVE**

**By Tom Thompson  
30005 W. Yuma Road  
Buckeye, Arizona 85326  
602-386-5989**

Fifteen years ago if I were asked to discuss labor management I would have thought about the delivery of calves that went on in our maternity unit. Back then I felt that giving a cow two hours of labor before I pulled the calf was proper labor management. Today many dairy-men have more employees than their ancestors had cows. As we approach the twenty-first century, we are learning that people management is as important as cow management and much more challenging. I have been asked to share my dairies' perspective on employee management. Let me start by giving a brief background on Stotz Dairy.

Stotz Dairy is located in the picturesque Sonoran Desert of central Arizona. The dairy started in 1981 with 539 cows and has slowly grown to its current milking herd size of 3,676. The herd has been the highest producing dairy in Arizona for ten of the past thirteen years with a 1996 rolling herd average of 26,154# 3.5% FCM. The cows are milked three times a day in two milking parlors. Cattle are housed in open dry lots with shade and cooling provided to partially mitigate the effects of the extreme desert heat. An alfalfa and corn silage based diet is blended with various commodities and by-products in a total mixed ration fed five times per day. A nutritionist and a veterinarian are the main consultants to the dairy.

The labor force of 38 full-time employees includes; 6 lead milkers, 6 assistant milkers, 6 trainee/cow pushers, 4 relief milkers, 4 outside and relief men, 3 feeders, 3 calf feeders, 3 herdsman, an assistant manager, an office manager and myself. The organizational structure enables each manager to supervise a manageable number of employees. This enables these supervisors to act as team leaders and to personally know and care about each individual on his team. Leadership's role is to provide focus and direction, allowing employees to deliver top performance. It is the leader's job to help the employee remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the employee becoming a great performer. This bottom up management approach is utilized to insure that each employee is treated as if he were the only employee on the dairy.

The goal of our labor management is to create a motivating work environment where people are passionate about milking cows and making an impact on the bottom line. At Stotz Dairy, we use an empowerment approach to enable each employee to treat each cow as if she were their only cow. Empowerment means giv-

ing the responsibility to the individual to do whatever is necessary to do the job and improve the system. This process allows the employee to perform the job to the best of their ability and continuously strive to improve that ability. Management needs to provide all the necessary tools, including knowledge, to help the employee perform the job well. This process encourages the employee to develop ownership of his area of responsibility and take self-directed actions. For example, when an unexpected storm moves in at 2:00 A.M., the calf manager will close the curtains at the calf barn so that the calves will remain warm and dry.

Stotz Dairies' mission statement is, "To maximize profitability by efficiently producing the maximum amount of high quality milk per cow while consistently treating employees with respect and cattle with care." To the average employee, this statement may not be highly motivating, compelling, or memorable, so we utilize a vision statement to more concisely keep our efforts in focus. Our vision is, "To be the highest producing dairy in Arizona." We have had better success communicating this vision because it is simple, easy to remember, and (thanks to the University of Arizona Monthly Newsletter) the results are monitored regularly and effortlessly. Some people criticize this vision because they feel that we should focus solely on profitability instead of high production. While I agree that the bottom line profit is extremely important, it would be tremendously difficult to inspire employees with the vision, "Let's make the owner rich."

The establishment of protocols or procedures for the jobs or tasks that are performed routinely on the dairy is essential. New procedural systems are created and existing systems are modified on a continuous basis. These systems include: how to milk cows; how to treat problem animals; how to feed cows, calves and newborns; how to sanitize equipment; etc. The axiom "if it ain't broke, don't fix it", does not apply here. We are constantly looking for ways to improve or simplify these processes. Employees are encouraged to question, challenge, and help improve those systems that prevent them from delivering top performance. Management's job is to create an environment where people can focus on the cows. The goal is to build systems and structures that focus people on our vision.

Proper recruitment of new employees is another key to helping the dairy realize its goals.

Our management team aggressively recruits for all

new positions or openings. The goal is to encourage as many qualified candidates as possible to apply for every opening. This is accomplished by placing ads, posting in-house job opportunity bulletins, visiting with other dairymen, consultants, and extension agents, and keeping a current list of job applicants. Another area that has helped us as we have grown in size, is the ability to establish entry level or trainee positions. These trainee positions allow us to employ individuals with little or no previous dairy experience, providing us the opportunity to hire the personality and train for the task. Whenever possible promotion from within is faithfully practiced. There are two objectives that we try to accomplish during the process of interviewing all top candidates. First, we try to convince the candidate why they should want to work with us. Second, we try to identify the most ideal person for the position. Personal and previous work references are thoroughly checked out. Putting great effort into the recruitment process insures that we start with the highest quality person available and reduces employee turnover.

Once the position is filled we start our educational process. We start by providing a complete job description to the employee. With some positions a video tape presentation of the job he will be performing is viewed. Then the new employee is placed with an existing employee who is empowered to show the new employee how to do the job. After sufficient time watching the trainer, the new employee is encouraged to work alongside the trainer. Eventually the trainer stands back and watches the new employee perform the job by himself. We find it beneficial to not only show how the job needs to be done, but also why it needs to be done and the implications if the job is not done correctly. This process can take one to three weeks depending on position, previous work experience, immediacy to fill the position, and the abilities of the individuals involved. This orientation period includes indoctrination of the new employee with information about our dairy, our philosophies, and potential career paths the employee can take while employed with us. Follow-up training is provided after the employee has been in the new position for awhile.

This education process continues indefinitely through annual or semi-annual schools performed on the dairy for milkers, breeders, and herdsmen. Cross-training of employees is practiced not only to prepare personnel for potential opportunities but also to make them aware



---

of the coordination and cooperation needed to make the dairy function efficiently. Due to the number of Spanish speaking employees, a weekly on-farm English speaking class for employees and their spouses is conducted. Outside education is also encouraged. All costs incurred are reimbursed when the education directly benefits the dairy. With prior approval non-dairy related courses are eligible for partial reimbursement. The goal of this continuous learning process is to increase the employees responsibilities as he increases his knowledge and demonstrates the ability to make good decisions.

As herd size has increased over the years, our management has had to evolve from a practical ("hands-on") cow managing style to a supportive ("coaching") people management style. As this transformation has occurred, the managers have tried to maintain a high degree of cowmanship to fill the role of consultant or teacher as the need arises. The manager's role as coach varies from employee to employee. With newer employees I find myself asking questions like "What are our options?... What do you think is best?... Why don't you do that?". After awhile the employee discovers that he is the one making the decisions. As the employee matures through our system he realizes he has the ability and power to make all but the most difficult decisions by himself. On those difficult decisions he knows that he will get management's full attention and cooperation as we try to collectively make the right decision. In this system it is the coach's job to help the employee learn from bad decisions while not chastising him for making a mistake. Some employees need more structure in their job environment, and the coach's job is to be more directive with those people. This direct approach is also used when an employee just plain doesn't know what to do in a specific situation.

We believe that if you can measure something, you can manage it. Goals are mutually established and results are measured and posted regularly. Since each employees viewpoint is valued, all employees are involved in solving problems and individuals and teams are recognized and praised when their ideas are utilized. Some managers feel that when people are happy they perform better. I feel that when people perform better, they are happier. Everyone wants to excel and to be part of a winning team. They take pride in their accomplishments. The ultimate goal is to have empowered employees establishing their individual and teams goals, monitoring their own performance, and subsequently recognizing

and celebrating their successes. Various performance indicators include; milk per cow, per shift, and per man hour; cost per CWT, per cow and as a percentage of the milk check; percentage of cows and heifers leaving the herd for various reasons; conception and heat detection rates per technician; daily dry matter intakes and feed refusals; etc. These results are compared to our own previous results, as well as with the results from other dairies that we regularly exchange information with.

Routine management meetings, periodic team meetings, written notices, softball matches, volleyball games, family bar-b-ques, costume contests, and pizza parties have all been used to improve communication, enhance camaraderie, and celebrate achievements. Competitive wages, paid vacation, regular days off, health insurance, life insurance, modern well maintained housing, a 401K profit-sharing/retirement plan, and the potential for key managers to become a partner in the dairy are utilized to adequately compensate employees. A semi-annual review is used to communicate performance satisfaction between employee and supervisor. The goal is to build a compensation system that rewards great performers and encourages not-so-great performers to improve.

In summary, labor management at Stotz Dairy starts with a vision. Every employee needs to hear it, understand it, believe it, repeat it and act on it incessantly. The best available people are recruited and hired. Employees are taught their new responsibilities through a job description, teaching aids, and peer training. Everyone is empowered to perform the job to the best of their ability. Systems are created and continuously updated as needed for all routine tasks. The education process is continued throughout the employee's tenure. Employees are provided consistent support as needed. Performance is measured and superior achievement is compensated.

To simplify what we are trying to accomplish, just remember the 4-L's. For a person to be content with their lot in life they need to: live, love, learn, and leave a legacy. This is essential in the workplace as well. **To live** – we try to provide fair compensation in a clean, safe work environment. **To love** – we try to build an environment where mutual trust, respect, security, and communication prevails. **To learn** – we continuously provide the opportunity and encouragement for people to grow and develop their skills and responsibilities. **To leave a legacy** – we provide an avenue where people can belong to a winning team by contributing to the accomplishment of

a mission that transcends their individual tasks and encourages them to be their best.

The most challenging aspect about labor management is that it is a never ending process. Success is a valuable teacher, providing you don't get lulled into complacency. Most dairies have similar cows and facilities. We all have the ability to use basically the same systems and techniques. The only real difference is the people and how they do what they do. After all success is not measured by what you know, but by what you do with what you know.

### **LABOR MANAGEMENT: THOUGHTS AND POLICIES**

**By Mike Veeman**

**Veeman Dairy  
23850 WCR 7**

**Loveland, Colorado  
970-669-9284**

**E-mail: [Cyberbull@AOL.Com](mailto:Cyberbull@AOL.Com)**

The dairy industry has changed a lot in the last twenty years. Improvements in nutrition, genetics, biotechnology, milking management and disease prevention has enabled us to yield more milk per cow and we are doing it more efficiently. Through the years we have faced many challenges. One constant challenge that remains for most of us is labor management.

While we may have different goals and methods, I believe we all desire our dairy operations to function smoothly and our labor force to perform at high levels of productivity. Labor management is important and requires specialized attention. Properly trained and motivated employees enable us to attain our goals. A properly functioning labor force should also be an extension of the owner's management philosophies. Many of the problems we deal with regarding labor today are the same problems we have faced in the past. Logic would indicate the need for change of direction to change the outcome. This might seem like an oversimplification, but sometimes old habits and management styles are hard to change.

During the last five years we have made several changes at Veeman Dairy in the area of labor management. We have made it a priority to improve the quality of our labor force. A few key areas are as follows; A quality bonus program, educational programs, regular review and analysis. We have seen a great deal of for-

ward progress since implementing these new programs and feel the time and effort has been a good investment. Employee turnover is costly. Not only because we are paying a non productive employee during the training period, but also because a new employee lacks experience. We have made a conscious decision to invest in our current workforce in an attempt to minimize turnover and improve productivity.

We are fifth generation cowmen at Veeman Dairy. Quality cow care has been the key to our success. In the future as we grow, our success will be directly dependent on how we motivate and educate our employees to make cow care their concern. Family members are directly in control at all levels of management. It is a challenge for us to delegate and encourage our employees to think for themselves in finding solutions to problems.

Recruitment, Initiation, Training and Motivation are the four main Labor Management areas I will cover in this presentation. I will explain our philosophies and policies. It is important to recognize that each dairy operation is unique with different; management styles, state labor laws, goals and priorities.

#### **Recruitment**

When an individual looking for work stops at our dairy, we do a brief interview and collect basic information. We can utilize this information in the future if we need to fill a vacant position. If a position becomes available and we do not have a qualified applicant in our files we start the recruitment process. First, we inform all our employees that there is a position available. There is a good chance a current employee has a relative or friend that is seeking employment. Second, we contact other dairyman in the area to see if they know of a potential prospect. Third, we communicate with other sources; veterinary, mastitis tester, DHI, etc.. The last resort is a newspaper classified. Recruitment for a herdsman is a complicated process and involves a broader search area. I have read several help wanted ads looking for a herdsman on Dairy-L and I believe the internet will become an effective tool in the future for locating herdsman and dairy manager candidates.

We schedule an interview when we find a qualified applicant. During the interview we ask for references, which we do check. We also check basic identification and verify that the individual has the proper documentation to work. Housing is an issue in our area. We check housing and transportation status. It is a problem to find out after a week of training that an applicant does not



---

have a place to live or a way to get to work. A few other things we look for are; punctuality, cleanliness, courtesy, reading and writing skills. It is important to note that experience is not the most important qualification. We can teach a quality applicant most job skills if the individual has the proper attitude and some basic qualifications. We require experienced applicants to demonstrate milking skills in the milking barn. This is part of the interview process. We cross train most of our employees and we feel everyone should have some basic milking skills on a large commercial dairy.

### **Initiation**

All new employees receive a basic initiation briefing at the beginning of work. The initiation involves collecting and copying all important information; social security card, driver's license, work visa and alien registration documents. Then we distribute tax papers and I-9 forms to the employee to complete. Then we explain the pay schedule, quality bonus program, vacations, and basic job expectations. We give the employee a chance to ask questions and discuss any concerns. If the employee is Spanish speaking, an interpreter is present.

Our initial training period will last from four days to one week. During this time the applicant will work alongside an experienced employee. During this time, management continually checks with the new employee to see if things are proceeding properly. It is always a concern that the other employees might not accept the new applicant and not cooperate during the training process. The senior employees are responsible for training. All employees are subject to a probation period of 3 months.

### **Training and Education**

Training and education are the areas we have seen the most return on time invested. Switching gears from management activities to the role of an educator is not always easy. It is difficult to take the time out of a busy day to gather a group of five or six employees to have a training session. We schedule meetings just as we would schedule barn service or an appointment with a banker. There must be a commitment to the training process for employee training to be routine and effective.

### **"Selling Quality Milk Is Our #1 Priority."**

Following proper milking procedures is essential to achieving that goal. Therefore, we review these basic items at every training session. It is important that all employees understand what the goals are so that every-

one on the team is heading in the same direction. It is easy to confuse a milker about whether cowflow is more important or doing a thorough job, if mixed signals are being sent. Goals and priorities should be clear.

Before attempting to educate employees it is important to first do an analysis of the current situation. This step is the most critical. What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? What skills do our employees have? How are you measuring current performance? Measurement is a key area, because without measurement it is very difficult to manage and effect change. A few examples of measurements would be; SCC, production per cow, PI, SPC, heat detection, clinical cows, clinical cows pulled by third party, all DHI statistics, safety records, financial records, measuring devices for temperature or volume, closed circuit camera, etc. Once you determine the proper measurement, it is possible to track progress. Graphs are very effective tools in analyzing and presenting data.

Taking the proper care to determine exactly what the problem is prior to finding a solution sounds easier than it is. A good example would be a situation where you develop a problem with liner slip. If you assumed that the problem was machine adjustment and never explored the possibility of liner performance you might blame employees, whereas the problem was something out of their control.

Before we focus on the actual training it is important to look at the tasks we are asking our employees to perform and the goals we are setting. Would we or could we actually do ourselves what we are asking others to do? One of the oldest and most important leadership principles is: Lead from the front. This does not mean you have to work side by side all the time. It does mean that the lines of communication are open and management is available at all times to guarantee that the employee has the proper tools and supports to accomplish the given tasks.

Preparing for a worker training meeting is a lot like a teacher preparing for class. We review our employees performance and decide what to include in the lesson plan. The subject matter determines the location of the meeting. If we need to demonstrate milking procedure we will bring cows in the barn and actually hold the meeting in the milking parlor. Usually we hold the meetings in a heated shop or the front lawn of the dairy on a picnic table. The goal is to hold the meeting in an area that is comfortable and free of distraction. We schedule meet-



ings during a time when all team members are free to attend. Attendance is mandatory. We try to create an atmosphere of open communication. We allow a relaxed atmosphere, but require that all attendees pay attention. During most meeting the employees usually share information regarding equipment performance and maintenance. Since most of our employees speak Spanish, an interpreter is always present. We keep a written record of all training sessions and the names of all those that attend. The training sessions last about one hour. We start with a quick review of our current situation. Did we accomplish the goals from our last meeting? Sometimes an individual might have made forward progress and it would be appropriate to recognize that accomplishment in front of the entire group. Possibly the entire team received a specific quality bonus for a positive CMT mastitis screening with no clinical cows.

**"Positive Consequences Encourage Good Future Performance"**

Then we cover new educational material. We usually go into detail, while keeping the concepts basic. We try to explain why we want things done a certain way. We might explain past experiences. We might also explain the economics of a particular situation. In most situations the discussion centers around the fact that we do things that are best for the cows, not what is easiest for the people. The cows pay the bills. At the end of all training sessions we review the items covered and ask for any questions or comments.

**Motivation**

Understanding what motivates people is difficult. The quality of work or the dependability of an employee has very little to do with how much money is being paid as long as the pay scale is reasonable and people are treated fairly. It is important that employees understand that the job they are doing is important. It is also important that they understand that they are part of a team and that the whole team must work together towards success. If an employee comes to work believing these things, chances are the employee will feel good about coming to work.

A few things I believe motivate employees are; extra care and concern during stress times, invitations to dinner or sporting events and special presents at Christmas other than cash bonuses. These types of perks should be reserved for special situations and should be handled in a sensitive manner. When an employee has made a special effort or has come up with a novel solution to a

problem, the proper recognition at the right time can be a tremendous motivator.

There is a big difference between an employee that cannot do something correctly because of ignorance or lack of proper equipment and an employee that will not do something. If an employee will not do something correctly it is time for reprimand. We try not to embarrass any employees during a meeting or while working. That would be counter productive. We do however, reprimand employees that violate established rules and show a lack of commitment to the common goals. Reprimands are done in private. All reprimands are short and to the point. Our quality bonus program allows one verbal warning and one written warnings prior to action. Both warnings include the rule violation and the potential discipline action if violations continue. The employee gets a copy of the Quality bonus report and the other copy goes in the employee's file. Discipline can range from a minor quality bonus reduction to termination. The goal is to correct the inappropriate behavior and hopefully to prevent having to terminate the employee. If the behavior continues termination is the proper action. Consistency is extremely important when dealing with employees. Make the rules and stick to them. People want limitations and they lose respect for an employer that does not follow through on policy.

**Conclusion**

Labor Management is one of the biggest challenges we face at Veeman Dairy. We are attempting to improve the quality of our work force through regular worker training and a Quality Bonus Program. We have been successful in reducing our labor turnover and continue to strive for increased productivity, while maintaining a high quality product. We have yet to find the silver bullet that solves all our labor challenges. As our herd size grows and the number of employees increases our labor management skills must evolve to meet the new challenges. Producing Quality Milk is our number one goal. Quality Employees are a basic key to reaching that goal.

**WHAT I LOOK FOR IN A JOB**

Tina Wright  
Head Miller, Fessenden Farms  
King Farry, NY

Employee-employer relations really is a loaded topic in an industry in which people management is in its infancy. People management is messy and emotional,



---

especially in dairying. Dairy farms often combine family and friends, usually dealing with each other as employers, employees or partners. Also, in dairying there are long hours, low pay and tough working conditions for everyone. Those conditions can produce big-time stress.

I feel I should know. I grew up on a small Moravia, New York, dairy and have worked most of my life in the industry. I spent an interesting year as a farm sitter and relief milker on dairies all over the northeast.

I've seen a lot of farms and a lot of changes in the past 20 years. What I'm saying here reflects a composite of all my experiences. I guess you could call this my disclaimer! My comments don't reflect any one farm I've worked on. But I think a lot of farm workers feel their bosses don't care whether they like their jobs or not.

What am I looking for in a job? Well, the perfect job, of course! Excellent cows and working conditions, high pay and benefits, wonderful colleagues... just as you owners look for the perfect employee. But, perfection isn't out there, so an employee looks for the best possible farm, just as you should seek the best possible employee.

Good pay and benefits are important. Dairy magazine articles on labor stress that pay is not our top priority. Okay, I'll agree that it's not our only priority. Benefits such as insurance, housing, utilities, use of a farm vehicle, and so forth, can help make a farm job competitive with non-farm work.

As I get older, my desire to work long hours seems to be slipping. Dairies in the future will need to offer a living wage at fewer hours and more time off. Good cows and facilities matter, too. We cannot all have the best cows and the newest parlors. Even if you don't, employees need to feel that the dairy is headed in the right direction with a positive future.

Morale is everything. Sometimes you must be like the coach of a basketball team that has just lost eight in a row. We employees are looking for leadership and good management ability from our bosses.

As a milker, I'm looking for a job in which people don't treat me like a flunky. Milkers can rate very low on the totem pole. The outside guys are "cool," the boss is "cool," the herdperson is "cool," but the milkers often are "nobodies" on the farms which the owner complains that he can't get any good help to milk his cows.

A hoof trimmer once asked me about a new milker. I told him a little about the guy. "Just a milker, huh?" he responded. I said, "Wait a minute. A good milker is a herdperson's best friend." Sometimes I think the auto-

matic takeoff milking machines have lulled us into thinking any warm body in the parlor will do. Sometimes we herdspersons, managers or owners aren't training or working with our milkers at all. They often are our best sources of information about mastitis, heats, sick and lame cows, and milking equipment and cooling problems. Some of the milkers whom we might dismiss as mediocre could be better motivated to our benefit as "cow people."

Now I realize it's easy for me to say these things. I'm not paying wages or recruiting. Availability of good people at a wage farmers can afford is among the industry's toughest problems, but recruiting is something on which farmers need to work harder. Often a farmer will hire anyone, especially for a less-skilled, part-time job. A night milker might say, "Hey, boss, a friend of mine is out of work," and, if he seems okay, he's hired. Be careful. The night milker might just want a buddy to drink beer with nights they're on together. Also, being casual about part-time workers is dangerous because they often are tapped for full-time positions that open up.

Certainly, some recruits recommended by employees are family can be just the people you want. But it can lead to cliques of workers that exclude other crew members, even to the extent of the clique running good people off your farm. Don't let hiring and handling employees just happen. Actively manage.

Why do I care so much about whom you hire? Well, these people are my colleagues. I have to work with them. As dairy crews get bigger, the importance of team work grows. This brings me to a big point...hire "people-people" for every job on the farm.

What do I mean by "people-people?" Workers who have the emotional maturity to be team-players aiming for a common goal; workers who routinely treat others with respect are "people-people." Good team players can have very different personalities, from talkative and outgoing to quiet and introspective. Not all "people-people" have the bubbly aura of game-show hosts.

Different job descriptions demand different relationship-skills... some jobs still can be filled by loners; but many farmers today recognize that even in lower-level jobs, one really impossible-to-get-along-with employee can put an entire workforce through an unpleasant soap opera.

I saw a recent help-wanted ad for a maintenance position on a large local dairy looking for someone "self-motivated and able to work well with others." A cliché, per-

haps, but just the qualities we seek when hiring.

Labor demographics for the future forecast that young white men are a shrinking proportion of the workforce. Dairying may need to expand its recruiting circle to include more non-traditional workers, such as more women, older workers and minorities of all kinds. More and more dairy employees were not raised on dairy farms.

These employees will demand jobs more like those off-farm. Farmers looking to the future should be studying the labor management of everyone from Wal-Mart to their local farm supply store. I encourage everyone involved in people management to brainstorm with human resource managers in other walks of life.

When I was a herdsman, I occasionally commiserated with my brother, a psychologist in the Syracuse, New York, school system who had moved to a low-level administrative position.

"Don't you hate how you have to suck up to people

all the time to get them on your side?" I complained to him one day about not having the power of a "real boss."

Jim replied that he had seen so many employees sabotage their bosses when they didn't buy his/her agenda that the persuasion was worth the trouble. He was right. The persuasion is worth the trouble.

Again, don't let hiring and handling employees just happen. Actively manage.

## Notes

# Notes