

# Implementing New Procedures on My Own Dairy

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## Abstract

In a decade and a half of dairy practice, I had the luxury of remaining outside the actual “black box” of the dairy’s inner workings. By this, I mean even when working directly with the herd manager, or even the owner himself, I was able to maintain a polite distance from the actual process of implementing my recommendations. Instead, I would make a management recommendation, often of unparalleled insight and breathtaking intuition, and insert it into the black box. Shortly thereafter, the appropriate management change would occur and be well entrenched by my next visit. Occasionally, if I was very lucky, there would be some holdup or breakdown in the implementation of the new procedure, which would allow me to use some of my best and wittiest consultant lines such as “Why are only some of your milkers...”, or, my personal favorite, “I thought we agreed you were going to...” The pleasure I took from my client’s discomfiture was reward enough for all my labors.

Now, however, I live in the black box. As a veterinarian who is both owner and manager of a 1500-cow dairy, it is my job to implement change, monitor results and look for opportunities to keep moving ahead. Now, as my advisors make recommendations, I need to evaluate the value of the recommendations as well as determine whether the dairy has the energy and resources to make the suggested change(s). This talk is intended to address that process.

## The Idea

When presented with a recommendation to make a change, I need to look at it from several angles: Is the recommendation based on observations of my dairy’s needs? If not, it is considered very skeptically. For example, if a nutritionist suggests that I buy a silage facer, but has not identified a need on my operation, it is not a highly valued idea. If my TMR stability is good and my pile faces are sharp, I will be more interested in talking about something else.

If the recommendation is poorly presented, even a good idea can be overlooked. I would prefer to hear an idea presented directly to me, not through an intermediary. If a recommendation is made to my herd manager to pass on to me, it may not stand up to cross-examination.

It may seem to have some potential, but if I can’t get clarifying questions answered, it may not go anywhere. The advisor needs to communicate directly with the person making the decision(s). If we can’t meet face to face, it’s appropriate to leave a note or make a follow-up call.

I also tend to look at how much “credibility capital” my advisor has built up. If the person making the recommendation has come up with appropriate ideas to improve my dairy’s performance in the past, they are given ever-increasing latitude over time. This is largely why recently graduated veterinarians, with all the knowledge of the profession at their fingertips, usually find they need to deliver a few calves and cure a few cows before they can get anybody to do anything.

Either when in practice or running a dairy, I have always had very little patience with the veterinarian or other consultant who complained that they couldn’t get their client to “do anything”. Why not? Were the ideas bad? Were the recommendations made without clarity or conviction? A professional dairy advisor who can’t get ideas implemented is like a baseball pitcher who can’t strike anyone out. That’s their job.

## The Decision

Once an idea has been presented to me, I need to decide whether to implement it or not. Assuming the idea has merit, there are several considerations that still need to occur.

Is it feasible? I may be presented with an idea I want to implement because it seems appropriate for my situation. For instance, if I am having too much clinical mastitis, a suggestion to double pre-dip may make a lot of sense. If, however, my parlor is going flat out to get done in time, this may present a problem. Can I get this change made without having an unintended consequence elsewhere? If double-dipping means doing a poorer job wiping teat ends, I may go backward by implementing this suggestion, rather than forward.

I also need to ask whether my team and I have the energy and resources needed to make a change. Any real change is an energy consuming process inside our “black box”. Even for a relatively minor change, we need to plan how to bring it about, communicate with and achieve buy-in with all affected parties, monitor the new procedure, and decide how we will evaluate whether we did the right thing or not. This can be illustrated with

the change to double pre-dipping. It sounds like a good idea. In order to do it, however, I need to make sure my vendor has enough dip coming to me to meet my increased needs (a classic derailment of a good idea), schedule a milker meeting to introduce the change to all parties at once, and monitor the implementation to make sure all parties have adopted it and are getting the job done properly. I also need to make sure I have not burdened my herd manager with many other "good ideas" recently, because monitoring any one new change at a time can be very time and energy consuming. Finally, if all of the above are done satisfactorily, all I may have accomplished is doubling my pre-dipping costs. I need to have some kind of measurable goal in order to determine whether I have accomplished a valuable improvement.

### **The Monitor**

An enormous amount of my time is spent monitoring how well we are doing in simply maintaining the procedures we already have in place. We try to pick appropriate, measurable parameters. For instance, I don't care to be (nor do I need to be) on hand to watch how colostrum is collected, handled, pasteurized and fed in each instance. I do, however, wish to look at a monthly report of serum proteins from all heifer calves, cross-referenced against the operator who fed the colostrum. This lets me know how well our team and procedures are working together.

### **Protocols**

This monitoring of procedures is another place that observers outside the "black box" can interact. After three years of owning a dairy, I have learned to avoid dogmatic declarations of what our procedures actually are. Too many times, I have stated things such as, "Our milking procedure is..." or "Every fresh cow receives...", only to have the other party state something like, "That's

not what I saw five minutes ago" with the same self-satisfied expression I used to use in similar circumstances. I have now learned to make my declarations of fact vaguely enough to be the envy of most politicians.

In all seriousness, we spend much time and effort to design and implement protocols that allow us to render somewhat complicated processes into repeatable steps. We use many protocols to simply define how we do things such as milking, calf delivery and treatment of diseases. Protocols let us know what we have all agreed to do and when. By agreeing upon a protocol with all involved individuals, we have agreed upon what steps are necessary and appropriate in order to have a task handled properly. That, ideally, lets us monitor both compliance and results. Only when we know what our procedures are, with some precision, can we hope to improve them in any reproducible, logical manner.

I think that having written protocols on a dairy is sometimes over-emphasized. Written protocols are of some benefit - in particular, they force management to think through, in detail, the exact steps in a procedure. On the flip side, too much emphasis on an exhaustive packet of written protocols can be counter-productive. So much time and energy can go into the process, that nothing else gets done. In addition, at least in our hands, protocols change and evolve as new ideas, techniques and technology come along. The idea of a protocol is not to lock the dairy into an outdated process, but to bring definition and clarity to what, exactly, is the agreed-upon process at the moment.

### **Summary**

I hope this discussion helps shine a bit of light into what goes on in the "black box". By better understanding the process, advisors can improve their ability to make an impact on their clients' dairies. As a manager and veterinarian, by thinking through the processes myself, I can make better use of the advisors I have.