

Veterinarians' Potential as Feedlot Managers

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It was fun having many of you at the feedlot the day before yesterday. I am sorry in some ways that the crowd was as big as it was—not that we were not proud to have you there, and we would have liked to have had everyone, but with as many people as were involved, it certainly made it impossible to spend the time with you on the individual basis that we would have liked.

The operation of a modern feedlot is, without a doubt, an industry. It is not a farming enterprise anymore; it is a manufacturing entity by any description, utilizing raw materials to produce an end product through the efforts of people. Being as close to home as I am, going back to the definition that was given a little earlier of an expert as being more than fifty miles from home—I am not!

When you enter into the field of management, from a practical veterinary medicine standpoint, the first question in your mind relates to your background, and why you think you can delve into this enterprise in this manner. I certainly have not had any specific training in college aimed at management procedure. I do not feel that I have had any specialized classes. What are my qualifications other than being a veterinarian? You find yourself immediately changing your lines of interest, your reading habits change from your AVMA journals, your *Modern Veterinary Practice* journals, and your *Veterinary Economics* to reading *Doanes*, *Business Week* and other magazines and publications of this type! You feel immediately that you are getting completely away from the realms for which you were really trained. In the vernacular of a meeting like this, the interest in IBR, BVD, PI₃ turns into PPM, otherwise termed “PM”—Poor Management, but a very definite problem, and one to be dealt with.

During a recent talk I was asked to speak specifically on factors that influence feedlot performance. In just a brief rundown, let's look at a few. *The purchasing of livestock certainly has to be at the top of your list.* If you are doing an improper job of purchasing, or if that person who is doing the buying for you is paying too much, there's nothing you can do in the way of herd help: nutrition, management of

anything else. Those cattle will not make you any money. On the other hand, if you are doing a good job of purchasing, not only your livestock but your raw ingredients, you can do a pretty PM job and get away with it. *Husbandry practices* have to be next on the list: housing, mechanisms and methods of feeding and handling, shipping, grouping, the daily care, sorting and processing, the feeding schedule, the regimes and things of this nature. *Nutrition* has to be right at the top of the basics—the feed formulation, production schemes, feed sources, purchasing of these feeds—all are going to have a very definite effect on the end result. *Animal health* cannot be left out, and obviously that is the reason we are here today. That is our field in veterinary medicine: prevention and therapeutics. You are dependent upon people to carry out this order, so what really is management? It has been described as doing things through people, or good management, by another author, as “the development of people.” The difference between operating and management becomes quite critical. The operator directs things; the manager directs people. The designing of methods for planning and directing becomes an analysis of number one, “where are you; what are your assets, your liabilities and the input you have to work with, with the desired products as the end product; and just exactly where do you want to go? What are your designs as far as goals. What are you trying to accomplish and in what manner. Who is going to drive; what is going to be assigned to whom; in what form; and what is going to be expected of which division or person? What is going to be the cost, and what are you willing to pay to get there? When are you going to know that you are there? How do you measure your results? What are your criteria for evaluation?” Certainly all of these things have to relate to finance in that this is undoubtedly still the number one intent. So, this is your measuring stick; the basic profit motive is paramount and must be considered as a goal.

These essentials—are they really so different from the operation of a successful veterinary practice? I have rambled a little bit purposely. I have talked about things that are specific to the feeding operation and referred to the cattle feeding industry specifically. Let me back up and review it just a minute. Doing things through people—the development of people—where are you—where do you want to go—who is going to drive—what is it going to cost—and when will you get there? Are these things really any different from the management of a good, successful, sound veterinary practice? I don’t believe they really are, and I don’t believe that there is any category of an occupational field, or any occupation as far as specific training is concerned, whether you are talking to a college graduate in cattle production or the other extreme, a Harvard Business School graduate, where you are going to find anybody any more specifically trained, or better adapted to the potentials of management in the feeding industry than you are right here in this room. We certainly have people here that have a good basic education in the sciences and arts, and you all have six years of good, hard college experience with major emphasis on animal production

philosophy. You have a higher than average ability or you wouldn't have been in veterinary school to start with. The basics are in you veterinarians, if that is the route you decide that you want to go, for the field of management. I must admit that in my situation I miss once in awhile the medical challenge of the individually sick animal.

I want to feature the feedlot with a desired goal of the most economical production of the highest quality product available. I find myself faced with the same challenge of diagnosis, prognosis, analysis and therapy that I had while I was in private practice. The considerations of all the assistance paramount to success are completely dependent upon the efforts of other people for the accomplishment of the tasks at hand. I enjoy working with people, and certainly this would have to be an essential. One of the major training institutions ran a survey of top management conditions but merely put a different definition on what was top management. It started with a man in the skilled labor field who worked strictly as a crewman, but one of the top that they could find. They asked him how he felt, or what he felt, was the most important criterion that he possessed or was able to produce that had put him in the position he had attained as one of the top craftsmen in his field. He went through a large number of these people. With very few exceptions, they found that this group of people attributed their success to their ability to do their job a little bit better than the other guy. Then they went through and surveyed the same way, but instead of talking to these exceptionally efficient crewmen or craftsmen, they talked to the crew chief—the guy that was the leader on a particular job—that had a group of these types of people assigned to him. He gave the same kind of answer. He felt that he attained his position and his job because he could do that particular skill a little bit better than the majority of the men with whom he was working, and he had the ability to work with some other men. Then they went another step up the management ladder and started talking to the design people—the people who were the business managers—the bosses to these crew chiefs—and asked them the same question. They picked out the good ones, the most successful ones, and asked them, “Why are you where you are?” “Well, it is because we understood the job to be done.” He understood the work and had the ability to manage people. Then they stepped up another level, over these people, to another layer of management. And, as the level on the ladder increased, you found that you decreased the importance of the actual ability to do that specific craft and increased the ability to work with people.

I could talk for the rest of the afternoon on many of my problems with people. If I've got a problem, it frustrates me more than anything else; today it's people problems. These are the type of problems that I do enjoy, so from that viewpoint I find myself right at home.