

# Fostering success through people: Creating a positive work culture on farms

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## Abstract

Labor management on today's modern dairy is vital to farm profitability and sustainability. High performing teams pose many challenges to keep continuously raising their own bar, in order to achieve higher output per worker. Business culture plays the most important role in developing personal, career, and individual growth for today's workforce. Like dairy farms there are no 2 vet practices identically the same, therefore it is not an exact science on the outcomes to be perfectly replicable. Managing a modern successful workforce is a constant moving target. These proceedings will discuss the key performance indicators of high performing teams, and how the role of the modern veterinarian can help farms succeed.

**Key words:** dairy, culture, value, investment, people, systems, respect, appreciation

## Résumé

La gestion de la main d'œuvre dans les fermes laitières modernes d'aujourd'hui est essentielle à la profitabilité de la ferme et à sa pérennité. Les équipes très performantes font face à de nombreux problèmes en continuant à mettre la barre toujours plus haute pour atteindre une productivité plus élevée par travailleur. Pour la main d'œuvre d'aujourd'hui, la culture de l'entreprise est le facteur clé pour la croissance sur le plan personnel et individuel et pour l'avancement de la carrière. Tout comme les fermes laitières, il n'y a pas deux pratiques vétérinaires tout à fait pareilles. Par conséquent, des résultats parfaitement reproductibles ne sont pas garantis. La gestion appropriée de la main d'œuvre d'aujourd'hui est une cible toujours en mouvement. Ces minutes discuteront d'indicateurs clés de performance dans les équipes très performantes et comment le rôle du vétérinaire moderne peut aider les fermes à réussir.

## Introduction

If you were to ask a modern dairyman what his most important asset is, you will get a variety of answers. Historically, cows, land, facilities, and people have been the responses. As farms have rapidly grown in size and scale starting in the early 1990s, many have stagnated over the past 5 years as milk price has remained at breakeven or worse for many

dairies that were used to consistent growth. When asked why I would leave a very successful industry position to go back to working on a dairy farm, I felt that growing, coaching, and leading a team was my next step in career growth. Many businesses know what their most important asset should be and state that people are their number one. Stating and demonstration of this belief and putting it into practice are 2 different processes. Businesses that practice putting people first is what makes their business sustainable. Dairy farms and vet practices will be able to maintain short term, but business is changing rapidly. Farms will continue to consolidate and grow in size, requiring a new skill set and knowledge base required from the herd veterinarian.

## Business Culture

Business culture is the binding force that attracts, maintains, and develops your workforce. All businesses have a culture, but many businesses do not quantify and define what those values are. High-performing teams can be developed, but maintaining them is hard. Dairy farms that are sustainable through many generations are a result of successful values that define their businesses. Sunnyside Farms Inc. started in 1939 and is now run by the third generation. Seven years ago, the current owners realized that they were approaching a time where their father and partner, along with many of the tenured employees, were nearing retirement. Many of these employees nearing retirement had seen the farm grow from a few hundred cows to 4,000. The process to define what values these employees had to make the farm successful was critical to know the history that built farm success. Replicating and expanding those same values to help the business remain sustainable was now the mission at hand.

**Integrity, Humility, Candor, Work Ethic, Excellence, and Respect** are the 6 core values that define Sunnyside Farms Inc. culture. These core values were personified in the people that made the farm successful throughout the years. After defining the values that made them successful, the next step was to use them as a tool for employee development. In today's business environment we use these in every aspect of the employee lifecycle. They provide clarity in hiring, firing, job performance, expectations, reviews, compensation, and most importantly employee coaching.<sup>1</sup> Coaching or motivating your workforce to achieve a desired outcome is difficult because of the variability of an individual's personality, experiences, education, etc. Core values set the expectations

of the business, so when a reprimand is needed it is easy for the employee and manager to define what behavior needs changing.<sup>1</sup>

Attracting talent is a desire of many dairy farms. Scarcity of skilled and unskilled labor needed on modern dairies is now commonplace. Low unemployment in many geographical areas, new laws requiring overtime for workers, alongside training and turnover costs makes the employment lifecycle critical to manage.<sup>1</sup> Not knowing it at the time, while working at DeLaval Inc., I was personally just starting to understand what “values” and “team” really meant. DeLaval was committed to people and invested in me heavily from both a training, compensation, and challenge standpoint. I knew what type of employer, manager, and team that I desired to work for, as we had the same values at our core. I told myself that if I ever found the same values on a dairy farm with opportunity for career and personal growth, that I would consider going back into production agriculture. Knowing Sunnyside’s core values and goals helped make my decision to join their team, while providing the structural base to keep the relationship developing and growing the past few years.

### **Investment in People and Systems**

Investing in people is not a new phenomenon. You get out of someone or something what you put into it. Sunnyside’s business model with employees is we are either growing you, or helping the individual seek new employment.<sup>1</sup> These are the only 2 options for the business. Anywhere in-between does not pay dividends for the employee or farm. Many conversations over an employee’s tenure are about the value they bring to our business and how that increases their value to the farm and their team. Profit and performance are two conversations intertwined with all farm staff. Candor lets our teams have open and honest conversations as to the state of the business, and how to increase performance to make better outcomes. This may sound taboo for owners, managers, and front-line employees to talk about together, but at our core we believe it improves overall farm performance.<sup>1</sup>

Training for the teams and managers takes a lot of time to organize and plan, and is a constant area where we can always improve. Combinations of classroom, hands on, one-on-one, and secondary education are all types of training our farm encompasses for different levels of employees. Our goal with training is never to just check a box that we completed a training.<sup>1</sup> We want to provide value and substance for all topics from animal handling, whole farm training, or right down to a one-on-one breeder training recertification with a herdsman and herd manager.<sup>1</sup> The fact is, people want to feel vested in their day to day lives, and their future. Providing the employee with a path to achieve knowledge and growth is a constant drive from our owners. Staying ahead of the curve in training leads to some employees outgrowing your system and leaving, but also raises the bar for all staff, so when they do leave others step in and fill their shoes immediately. The

more knowledge we can share from ownership down creates loyalty, empowerment, and accountability in day-to-day operations. High performing teams train, prepare, and develop knowledge better than their competitors.

### **Respect and Appreciation**

Respect for oneself and for others can have vast benefits or consequences on high-performing teams. It starts at the top of the pyramid and cascades down. If a business does not have its owners, managers, and key stakeholders bought into their decisions and actions, then turnover is abundant throughout the ranks. Employees leave because of poor work environments and ineffective managers, which often demonstrates that there is a culture problem within the business. As a principal owner or manager of your vet practice, take the time and one-on-one ask a subordinate team member how good of a job they think you are doing?<sup>1</sup> You can find out more from an honest conversation in a one-on-one setting, than you probably can through employee surveys or questionnaires.<sup>1</sup> Candid honest conversations will bring to light strengths, weaknesses, and possibly low-hanging fruit for your managers and business to go after.

Appreciation helps move teams forward by highlighting successful accomplishments, or acknowledging getting over a major roadblock. Signs of appreciation play a significant role by boosting employee morale both in and outside of work. Appreciation starts with flexibility in the workplace. Being able to balance lifestyle and work in a dairy setting is something Sunnyside strives to achieve.<sup>1</sup> We accomplish this through many ways such as, but not limited to, paternity leave, paid sick days, flexible schedules, mental health days, on site sports fields, achievement dinners, and so on. All are reviewed on a case-by-case basis without a written rulebook.<sup>1</sup> Managers have the ability to communicate to owners when appreciation is needed so that acknowledgement can be made to efforts that support our core values. Respect and appreciation for others is either contagious throughout the ranks, or its absence creates a cancer that can destroy your culture.

### **A Veterinarian’s Role at Sunnyside**

Success at Sunnyside Farms Inc. and many other successful dairies can be attributed to the role a herd vet played in their management and growth. Growth being defined in this case as knowledge to help make sound decisions daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. There is a balance to the art, which must encompass the following key areas that make our dairy business better each year.

Trench warfare, as we like to call it, was a core value Dr. Chuck Guard brought to the table.<sup>1</sup> The ability to diagnose a problem, and present a solution or new technique to change outcomes is what veterinarians seem to do best. The ability to work long days and be on call at night is what myself and many dairymen think of when we consider your job

description. The need to be in the trenches, tripping over problems that we do not see, is a skill set harder to come by as a new generation emerges. Keeping that core value alive will be critical as the next generation of veterinarians comes on the scene.

Consultation on herd health decisions, especially in relation to economic outcomes, is another area where we have used the talent of our herd vets. Their ability analyze data, provide metrics, and give data driven advice has advanced the business greatly through the years.<sup>1</sup> Combining that skill set with VCPR, SOPs, animal welfare and handling, employee training, and new idea generation, provides the ability to utilize your talents on a weekly basis to grow our knowledge base. Our current herd vets can train in multiple languages, which is a huge asset to a diverse workforce. Consultation from our vet service is another way Sunnyside Farms Inc. has stayed ahead of the competition over the years.

Research and farms studies are a very important part of the Sunnyside Farms Inc. decision making process. They enable the farm to make scientific based decisions on herd health practices.<sup>1</sup> Combining university sponsored research trials, in conjunction with in-house studies, has enabled the farm to stay ahead of the curve on new treatment development, best management practices, and emerging technologies. Current studies ongoing at this moment involve calf health, colostrum quality, mastitis treatment, vaccines, and sensor technology just to name a few. Clinical research understanding our systems is key. We have 2 rules for research trials. The first is any research does not change, but adapts to our day-to-day management during the research time period.<sup>1</sup> In layman's terms, you can do what you want but do not change our routines, or disrupt people and processes. The second is that we only entertain trials if they encompass product or management practices that we might adopt long-term.<sup>1</sup> Consistently trying new things with the help of our vet team is what keeps us at the forefront.

### **Stepping up to Tomorrow's Opportunities**

Opportunity is a word our business uses to describe the challenges we face in a more positive approach.<sup>1</sup> Successful teams use bumps in the road to propel them to get better. Many challenges happen in all businesses, but I feel there are 2 specific opportunities that will help vet practices succeed with the next generation of dairy managers.

*Animal Welfare Training.* Never before has dairy farming been under the microscope as much as it is now in regards to animal welfare. Things we did in the past such as tail docking, down-cow practices, prod availability, and even euthanasia techniques have evolved greatly over the last decade. Things we consider today to be normal best management practices all need to be reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness for

humans and animals. Our team views many of the changes over the past 10 years as the right thing to do for both cows and people. Our herd vets have helped take a leading role in making sure integrity is part of all our SOPs when it comes to animal care. What was right last year for down cow care might need to be updated this year to utilize a new technique or tool for animal comfort. The role of the veterinarian is to keep our team up to date on best management practices.

*Adaptation of Technology.* Successful managers are adopting and adding many scientific tools to help enhance their management through the use of sensors, GPS, robotics, sort gates, RFID, and many other technologies. Our goal with our staff is to provide profitable tools that make their jobs more efficient, productive, and effective. Working smarter, not harder, is the farm motto whenever we try to increase worker productivity. For example, the paradigm shift of using sensors to monitor fresh cows and only check the exceptions through a sort gate at milking time, compared to historical protocols of locking fresh cows up once per day and doing physical exams. Technology today is much more proven than 20 years ago. Data is abundant and accurate with these systems. Opportunity lies in putting them to work to increase worker productivity and farm profitability. Successful dairy teams are implementing technology at a very fast pace.

### **Conclusions**

Dairy farms and agricultural business are changing at an ever increasing rate. Successful managers of these teams start by defining how culture is necessary to grow their business now and in the future. The past, present, and potential future culture is a moving target that constantly evolves over time, creating the base for all farm decisions. The next step in the successful dairy team pyramid is for teams to invest in their people and systems, to provide the tools needed for day-to-day success. Finally, the top of the pyramid is capped with respect and appreciation for others. This pinnacle helps retain key employees by clearly demonstrating the value they bring to the business.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Reference**

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