Mentoring milkers while bridging the language barrier

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Abstract

The dairy industry is increasingly reliant on hired employees, much of which is represented by immigrant labor. Thus, there is a growing need for training and education of dairy employees as there is often a lack of previous dairy experience, and employee turnover rates are problematic on many farms. This is especially the case for tasks related to milk quality, i.e., milking, moving cows, housing management, etc. Veterinarians are uniquely qualified to help bridge the gap between the labor needs of the dairy farm and the needs of employees so that they can better engage in the productivity of the farm.

This article will offer personal experiences from the perspective of a private practitioner, on how to develop and sustain an employee training model that not only includes 'how to do things', but 'why they are important'. Cultural and language barriers may intimidate some practitioners from participating in employee training if the farm workforce includes Latino employees. However, these issues can be addressed and economic value for the farm and employee satisfaction can be attained.

Key words: dairy workforce, employee training

Résumé

L'industrie laitière dépend de plus en plus d'employés embauchés qui sont pour la plupart des travailleurs immigrés. Il y a donc un besoin grandissant de formation et d'éducation des employés de fermes laitières en l'absence fréquente d'expérience antérieure dans le milieu laitier et parce qu'un grand roulement du personnel est problématique dans plusieurs fermes. C'est particulièrement le cas pour les tâches reliées à la qualité du lait comme la traite, le mouvement des vaches ou la gestion des stalles. Les vétérinaires sont particulièrement qualifiés pour combler le fossé entre les besoins en main d'œuvre de la ferme laitière et les besoins des employés afin qu'ils puissent mieux participer à la productivité de la ferme.

Cet article partagera des expériences personnelles du point de vue d'un praticien en privé sur comment développer et maintenir un programme de formation d'employés qui n'inclut pas seulement 'comment faire les choses' mais aussi 'pourquoi elles sont importantes'. Les barrières culturelles et linguistiques peuvent nuire à la participation de certains praticiens aux formations d'employés si le personnel de la ferme inclut des employés Latino-américains. Toutefois, ces problèmes peuvent être abordés et la valeur économique de la ferme et la satisfaction des employés peuvent être atteintes.

Introduction

The milking parlor is the heart and soul of any dairy farm. Especially in times of low milk prices, dairy profitability hinges on the parlor. Despite its importance, most entry level employees begin here; often with little to no training or supervision. Milking cows is a demanding job requiring speed, consistency, and attention to detail. Yet, as long as cows are making it through the parlor in a timely manner, we tend to let things be. On many farms, there is an emphasis on parlor throughput and not milking efficiency.[5] However, this approach to 'parlor efficiency' and not milking efficiency can result in poor milking efficiency and lost milk yield.[3,4] Thus, herds that push the workload of employees in terms of cows milked per hour may not only be decreasing farm productivity, but also increasing employee turnover. Over 98% of dairy producers state that finding and retaining good employees is a top priority for their herd. But, annual turnover rates vary widely, and on some farms can be over 100%.[1]

Universities, consultants, and other industry representatives have made available a wealth of educational tools in both Spanish and English. Yet there is still a missing link between these tools and employee understanding.[2] As bovine practitioners, I believe we're in a great position to provide the needed connection to make on-farm employee education successful. By utilizing group meetings, on-the-job training and much more (in Spanish), our veterinary clinic has expanded services within our current client base and expanded the number of farms we serve as well. This paper aims to describe a bovine practitioner's approach to transitioning into the role of an employee educator.

Background and Approach

For any type of training to be successful, it is obvious that the first step is presenting the information in a clear, easily understood manner. In the dairy industry, this usually needs to be offered in Spanish, which can be the first hurdle we face in employee training. One of the things I regret not doing sooner in life is learning Spanish. I took the required 2 years of introductory Spanish classes in high school and 1 day in undergraduate before dropping it. Nearing graduation in veterinary school, my dairy Spanish vocabulary consisted solely of "*vaca*" and "*leche*". Knowing that the ability to speak Spanish would greatly help me in the future, I enrolled in a

6-week Spanish immersion program in Mexico—2 months before graduation. I gained a great Spanish language base, but I was far from what most would consider fluent.

I was hired into Team Management Concepts veterinary clinic after graduation and my employer knew of my time in Mexico. So, when 1 of our smaller dairies complained to my colleague of not being able to communicate with their Hispanic milkers during a routine herd health, I was volunteered to hold an employee meeting. I look back on the first meeting as a laughable event. I had spent days beforehand writing a script of what I would say in Spanish and looking up any words that I thought I might need. I had printed off pictures and copies of a PowerPoint presentation. During that meeting, I felt like I kept my head buried in what I had written as I basically read it off word for word. I was embarrassed by what I considered a poor-quality meeting as I stumbled to communicate in Spanish. The 2 employees were extremely understanding, however, and to my surprise had many follow-up questions. They even requested additional meetings to cover further topics.

Fast forward several years, and my Spanish speaking abilities have improved considerably. I've utilized tools such as *Hoards Dairymen en espanol* to increase my dairy vocabulary, internet platforms such as italki.com for structured Spanish classes, and everyday practice with dairy farm employees to increase my talking and listening abilities. Employee meetings that I lead have become exponentially more professional. I now utilize a computer with projector for initial farm meetings. Presentations are customized to be farm-specific. Video clips, pictures, and diagrams are incorporated as much as possible to describe not only how something needs to be done but the "why" as well. Meetings are generally limited to only 1 or 2 topics to keep meetings short and followed up by on-the-job training. Employees are provided with varying types of feedback dependent on the farm, and topics are continually revisited in differing approaches to further drive home understanding.

It has been a learning process for me since that initial employee meeting, but 2 things continue to ring true. First, the Spanish doesn't have to be perfect for a meeting or training to be successful. Second, veterinarians are well suited for the role of employee educator and science teacher. It may not be a traditional role for the veterinarian, but it is a sustainable role.

Why the Veterinarian?

An outsider looking in might wonder, and something I often wondered myself initially, why would a dairy farm pay a veterinary clinic for employee training with far from perfect Spanish when many companies within the industry will bring a native speaker on farm for an employee meeting free of charge? It's a question I've passed on to my clients. Their responses, "Free only lasts so long", "Meetings can be customized to specific farm issues." "The information is already specific for my farm." "My employees aren't presented general information then asked to apply it to our system."

As veterinarians we are required to keep up-to-date with our medical knowledge, we visit the individual farms on a routine basis, and we know the employees. As employees change or protocols have to be adjusted, we as veterinarians remain constant. It's not a large leap by any means into the role of science teacher. We just have to change the way we think of our role as a farm veterinarian.

Summary

Successful employee training isn't something that can be made into a one-size-fits-all template. It's not something that can be accomplished with 1 or 2 employee meetings a year sitting in front of a PowerPoint. Employee training is successful when presented in an easy-to-understand manner, which often involves Spanish. It does not hinge on having the ability to speak Spanish perfectly. But making the attempt to communicate in the employee's native language, increases employee engagement and response to training. Effective learning and teaching occur when time is spent together working amongst the animals. Employees need feedback on job performance, and continual repetition of the information is important for understanding and retention. A growing body of science suggests that effort will increase productivity and employee engagement on your clients' farms.

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