

Understanding dairy employee attitudes, concerns, and perspectives to improve employee management and overall herd health

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Introduction

A significant part of dairy management on large farms involves managing the employees who milk, feed, and provide care to the cows. However, management of people is generally an area about which dairy owners express a lack of knowledge and comfort. In 2012, a project was initiated to improve management of dairy employees by providing employee feedback to dairy owners through an anonymous telephone interview conducted by a single bilingual interviewer. The objectives of this study were to learn about the attitudes, concerns and perspectives of dairy farm employees, to apply gathered information to management practices and choices, and to recommend changes in management to better engage employees in the success of the operation.

Materials and Methods

A survey was developed to measure employee engagement and provide information on the factors that contribute to their level of engagement. The survey included questions in 7 areas: employment length and satisfaction; communication and farm goals; tools and training; independence, ideas, and performance; relationships; problems and pitfalls; and management and respect. Dairy farms in Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut with a minimum of 5 employees were enrolled in the project. Owners met with their employees to explain the purpose of the survey and the safeguards implemented to ensure anonymity. Employees were provided paper copies of the survey in their preferred language and instructed to call a bilingual interviewer to provide answers to the survey questions. Individual employee responses from each farm were collated and reported to respective farm management teams. Responses across farms were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

Results

As of April 2013, 120 employee interviews from 8 farms have been completed. This represented 78% of eligible employees on these farms. Challenges identified include shorter duration of employment for Hispanic employees (30% employed < 1 year), compared with the duration of employment for non-Hispanic employees (9% employed < 1 year) and intention to remain on the

operation a shorter duration (< 3 years, Hispanic: 40%, non-Hispanic: 29%). The employees' ability to recount farm goals was extremely weak across all employee demographics. When employees were asked about their interest in learning, the average response was 4.69 on a scale of 1-5, where 5 indicated a strong desire to learn more. However, training was provided infrequently with 47% of respondents indicating training was either "never" offered or provided "only when they started". When provided, training was most frequently provided by co-workers. Veterinarians were a significant source of training on some farms. Feedback by employers was also a weakness, with 39% of employees reporting that they received feedback either "never" or a "few times a year". Relationship with co-workers was rated lower than the relationship with the supervisor, with scores on a 1 to 5 scale of 3.76 and 4.43, respectively.

Significance

Dairy businesses cannot rise higher than employees will take them, and good management is critical to engage and retain employees. Employers need to start with setting goals or Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for all areas of the operation and communicating those to employees. In this study, employers were slightly better than employees at being able to clearly state farm goals. Employers also failed to fully capitalize on employee interest in learning by offering sufficient training. Language barrier may be partially responsible for these findings; however, employers underestimate the interest of their employees in learning. Relationships among co-workers were weaker than anticipated and problems were often noted between shifts, which may reduce protocol compliance. Feedback by employers was infrequent and maybe related to the lack of specific KPI on farms.

Veterinarians who work with large dairy operations are faced with these challenges and may be able to better serve the operations by working with owners to set KPIs, train employees, and establish criteria for feedback. Because of employee turnover, basic training should be offered frequently, but advanced training should also be offered to long-term employees. Short duration of employment presents a variety of problems for consistent implementation of protocols. Working with farm management to improve management of employees may improve herd health programs.