

Effective Labor Training

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Abstract

The need for effective labor training and management continues to grow as dairies become larger and as the operators of smaller dairies seek more free time away from the farm. Dairy veterinarians are logical facilitators of this process, although they often lack formal training as educators. Other challenges, such as language barriers and literacy levels among dairy employees, can make implementation of training programs a challenge. Within this role, veterinarians also serve as liaisons between management and employees. Serving as an on-farm educator and facilitator can be very rewarding for the practitioner and can create significant positive returns for the dairy.

Résumé

Le besoin d'une formation et d'une gestion efficace de la main d'œuvre s'accroît car les fermes laitières sont de plus en plus grosses et les dirigeants des plus petites fermes laitières quant à eux tentent d'avoir plus de temps libre loin de la ferme. Les vétérinaires laitiers peuvent être logiquement des facilitateurs dans cette démarche bien qu'ils n'ont pas souvent une formation professionnelle d'éducateurs. D'autres défis, comme la barrière de la langue et le niveau d'éducation des employés de la ferme laitière, peuvent faire en sorte que l'implémentation d'un programme de formation soit difficile. Dans ce contexte, les vétérinaires peuvent aussi servir d'intermédiaires entre les gestionnaires et les employés. Devenir un éducateur et un facilitateur à la ferme peut être très enrichissant pour le praticien et peut avoir des répercussions positives pour la ferme laitière.

Introduction

The need for effective labor training and management continues to grow as dairies become larger and as the operators of smaller dairies seek more free time away from the farm. Dairy veterinarians are logical facilitators of this process, given their intimate relationships with dairy operation and knowledge of production medicine principles. Their experiences with the implementation of different programs on multiple dairy operations are also an asset in the effective development of these programs.

Although we are the logical professionals to deliver this training, few veterinarians have been formally trained as educators. The significant increase in the

number of Hispanic dairy employees is also a challenge for veterinarians who are not fluent in Spanish. These significant challenges must be recognized as the dairy veterinarian devotes more time in this area of practice.

A query of New York State Cattle Health Assurance Program (NYSCHAP) annual herd plan reviews shows that about 25% of 482 dairy farm operators feel employee turnover is a limiting factor on the performance of their dairy. In addition to labor training, effective employee management and retention is an area where dairy veterinarians can have a role. We will not likely serve as the direct manager of these employees, but can assist in the development of methods for process monitoring, employee reviews and recognition programs.

When initiating an employee training program on a dairy it is important for the employees to recognize that meetings and training sessions are not retribution for wrongdoing. It is a continuation of education. The process of continuing education is very relevant to professionals, but less obvious to unskilled workers. This is a particularly difficult concept for Hispanic employees to initially recognize. Once they have been introduced to education, they will embrace it. However, they are often quite hesitant at first, thinking that the training session is in response to problems such as poor udder health or increased calf mortality on the dairy.

One important aspect of overcoming this obstacle is making contact with the employees and bonding with them. This is often a very easy process, as we have direct contact with dairy employees on a weekly or semi-weekly basis. It is important to break the ice and make sure they realize that you can have an allegiance. You don't have to be their best friend, but it is important to be friendly and have mutual respect.

If you are bilingual, this personal relationship is often much stronger with Hispanic employees than with the average Anglo employee. Especially in regions of the country where large Hispanic populations do not exist, the bilingual veterinarian becomes an advocate for both workplace and personal issues. This relationship of strong respect places the bilingual veterinarian in a unique position to become a very effective teacher to a group of dedicated and self-motivated individuals.

The Pareto Process is a manufacturing principle that states: 80% of problems are the result of 20% of process failures. We can therefore concentrate our training on the processes which really make a difference. Certainly it is "all of the little things" which separate the average and best dairy managers, but we must be careful not to overwhelm employees in training

sessions. Research has shown that most less-educated employees disengage from a lecture-type presentation every eight minutes. It is therefore imperative that we keep a training session stimulating to allow these employees to absorb the materials.

Literacy is another common obstacle that we often encounter during training sessions. Presentations need to have many pictures and diagrams. Props also keep the presentation stimulating and allow for hands-on demonstrations. During the development of training materials such as handouts and standard operating procedures (SOPs) it is important that bilingual materials are available and that these documents are easy to understand. Flow charts, diagrams, animations and pictures are excellent visual aids to outline a process such as milking procedure.

At the beginning of any training session, it is important to assess what the employees already know. Although there may be different levels of experience and knowledge among the employees, this provides an excellent opportunity to implement mutual training between employees on the dairy. This also gives us the opportunity to ask for input. We are not the workers milking the cows each shift, feeding calves or working in the maternity area. We are the experts to provide the technical training, but can't forget to seek input from the employees to ascertain if these procedures can be implemented on the dairy. Asking for their input places more of the ownership of a procedure with the employee and often insures a greater chance of full implementation.

Having a farm-specific, versus generic, training program is also imperative for complete implementation on the dairy. Group sessions with employees from multiple dairies can be useful and provide a great opportunity for workers to take personal pride in their operation. It must be recognized that further on-farm training is also required. We can teach the basics of milking procedure and assisting with calf deliveries in a generic format, but there are many specifics on each dairy that are critical to a successful outcome.

Another concept is often debated while training unskilled labor is whether or not to only train the *what* or train the *why* also. Although some workers do not really care as to why a certain procedure needs to be done, full adoption of a procedure is generally more successful if the employees know why the process is important. An excellent example of this is the simple process of complete coverage of teats with post-dip. If someone knows why this step is important we generally get better implementation.

The initial training session just started the beginning of continuing education on the dairy. Tracking and showing the results of the training to both the employees and managers is necessary for the success of the program and to prevent procedural drift. Some

feedback can be almost immediate, such as utilizing Lactocorder graphs to demonstrate the benefits of proper milking procedure. Other indicators, such as tracking somatic cell count (SCC) and stillbirth or morbidity rates, may be more long term. It must be realized that the immediate measure is directly related to the procedure itself. A change in SCC does not necessarily indicate a drift from proper milking procedure. A more appropriate direct measure of the procedure may be parlor throughput or teat coverage of post-dip. The bottom line is to let the dairy staff know where to turn for answers. They need to realize that training is dynamic and ongoing. Protocols will need periodic revision based on changes within the dairy.

If we have successfully sold the employees on the fact that training is not retribution for wrongdoing, then we must follow through with recognition of a job well done. All too often, dairy employees are not given recognition for improvements on the dairy. This does not have to necessarily be linked to financial rewards. The recognition must be prompt, not given months after a perceived improvement, and should be made public so that peers and other professionals visiting the dairy can see. The use of a simple message board is an effective tool for this purpose.

While in this role, the veterinarian will often be made privy to on-farm issues prior to the manager realizing these concerns. For the benefit of effective employee management, the veterinarian can serve as a segue between employees and management. In some instances, management may have unrealistic goals or expectations. This relationship is even more critical with the management of Hispanic employees, where the respect of authority will often preclude the employee's expression of workplace dissatisfaction or conflict.

As the dairy industry continues to evolve, production medicine veterinarians must continue to expand services to meet the needs of clients. This evolution will place us in roles as on-farm educators and liaisons between employees and managers. Many of us find this a difficult role within our own practices, and now we are offering these services for our clients. Serving as an on-farm educator and facilitator can be very rewarding for the practitioner and can create significant positive returns for the dairy. Effective implementation and follow through is critical for the success of these training programs.

References

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