

# Dairy Session

## Minimizing barriers: Developing culturally-congruent training programs for the dairy workforce

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### Abstract

While veterinarians are increasingly seen by dairy producers as training providers for their diverse workforce, veterinary medicine curricula offers limited opportunities for practitioners to develop into effective communicators, especially when having to engage with multicultural groups. Conducting training on a dairy farm to change behaviors and to improve animal health and performance goes beyond a presentation translated by a bilingual dairy employee. While language barriers should be addressed, veterinarians should also be aware of cultural factors that may affect communication and the success of the training efforts. This article and associated presentation propose best practices for the facilitation of culturally-congruent training programs to improve dairy worker performance.

**Key words:** dairy, training, employees

### Résumé

Bien que les vétérinaires soient de plus en plus considérés par les producteurs laitiers comme des fournisseurs d'information pour leur main d'œuvre diversifiée, les programmes d'étude en médecine vétérinaire offrent peu d'opportunités aux praticiens de développer l'efficacité de leur communication surtout lorsqu'ils travaillent avec des groupes multiculturels. Faire de la formation à la ferme laitière pour changer les comportements et pour améliorer la santé animale implique d'aller au-delà d'une simple traduction de la présentation par un employé bilingue de la ferme laitière. Bien qu'il soit nécessaire de prendre en compte les barrières linguistiques, les vétérinaires devraient aussi être au courant des facteurs culturels qui peuvent affecter la communication et le succès des efforts de formation. Cet article et la présentation qui s'y rattache proposent les meilleurs pratiques pour que les programmes de formation soient mieux adaptés à la réalité culturelle dans le but d'améliorer la performance des employés de la ferme laitière.

### Management Support Matters

Culture shapes all sorts of interactions in the workplace.

Culture is defined by more than just the language, religion, beliefs, and views that a group of dairy employees might share. Each dairy has a unique culture, greatly influenced by management. Practitioners offering training opportunities should be aware of how the dairy's culture values learning and communication, and should discuss expectations with managers.

Too often, management fails to provide appropriate support after training. When this occurs, workers see training sessions as isolated events, inconsistent with farm management's message, and long-term changes in worker performance are difficult to achieve. Recent research identifies managers as having key roles in maintaining a motivated workforce and increasing the job satisfaction and sense of well-being of dairy workers.<sup>1</sup> Hence, dairy veterinarians and managers should discuss training goals as well as strategies to support worker performance long-term, including follow-up meetings and providing feedback to employees.

### The Importance of Listening

Although cultural differences between the veterinarian and dairy workers should be addressed to improve the quality of effectiveness of communication, it is critical that these differences do not become the focus of training interactions. Instead, veterinarians could invest some time in getting to know dairy workers by engaging in small talk and truly listening.

By listening to workers, practitioners learn valuable information regarding the way they perceive a problem or where they see opportunity, potential conflicts that may arise when implementing change, what the workers' role in addressing the problem could be, and how the proposed solution could benefit all. In fact, listening and getting to know their audience is what good salespeople do. And as veterinarians facilitating training programs, we are simply selling an idea: *Why should the dairy implement a new procedure or modify an existing one?*

Listening is not only crucial to selling that idea, but it can also help with finding common goals. Identifying commonalities while being sensitive to cultural differences creates spaces more conducive to learning and allows people to focus on a shared vision of health and productivity.

### What about Language Differences?

Language barriers may result in serious challenges and limit our ability to communicate with dairy workers. If an interpreter is employed to facilitate communication, the individual chosen must not only be competent, but also trustworthy. Recent research highlighted potential conflicts and distrust associated with the use of interpreters on dairy operations. While dairy workers see language barriers as easily overcome through negotiation between speakers, they express much distrust in dairy workers serving as interpreters, as people often use that position to benefit their own standing on the farm.<sup>2</sup>

For learning to be accessible and effective, the language used should be congruent with the needs of the workers. This is not limited to offering the training (with or without an interpreter) in the workers' native language. Practitioners should consider literacy levels, the technical terms used, the way in which new concepts are defined and the degree of detail provided.

### Engaging Workers in the Training Process

Ideally, workers should be engaged in the planning of training programs. Besides helping with congruent language, workers can provide valuable input on content and delivery methods. Dairy worker participation in the development of training can ensure that as veterinarians we don't assume a basic level of understanding and instead address knowledge gaps that could compromise animal and human well-being on the dairy. Focus groups of dairy workers revealed that animal behavior and handling are not well understood by animal caretakers, even by those with several years of dairy work experience.<sup>2</sup> Without this basic knowledge, training programs on disease prevention and management could yield less than desirable results as the workers could potentially miss abnormal behaviors indicative of disease or put themselves in harm's way when handling an animal in need of medical treatment.

Dairy worker input is extremely valuable regarding training logistics, including delivery methods. While many of us are conditioned to sit in a classroom and listen to lectures for several hours a day, this conventional way of teaching might not be the most effective for a group of dairy workers. Many factors specific to foreign-born Latinx agricultural workers warrant that we approach training interventions a bit differently than how we were trained in veterinary medicine. While hands-on learning opportunities, small group discussion and other active-learning strategies are beneficial to most students, they are especially critical to the success of training programs for this population of workers.

One unconventional approach is *training for workers by workers*. Recent work showed that a training program on zoonotic risks designed in collaboration with dairy workers was effective in changing knowledge, attitude and behaviors of other dairy workers.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, workers appreciated seeing their colleagues as content experts and partnering with veterinarians. Dairy worker participation in the creation of training programs also improves their motivation and sense of accountability. Whether developing a training video, revising standard operating procedures or co-facilitating a cow-side discussion, veterinarians should consider collaborating with dairy employees to increase cultural-congruency, potential for engagement and efficacy of training programs.

### References

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