

LABOR MANAGEMENT

By Mary Kraft

Break training into small, manageable pieces

Training People is Like Eating an Elephant

Our 5,200 milking cow facilities in northeast Colorado require lots of people to get the job done. Early on, we realized we couldn't do it all by ourselves and would have to bring other people in if we wanted our business to grow.

We started in an old facility in 1988, then remodeled it from a double 3, to a 4, 5, 6, 7, 12 and finally a double 22. We updated our machinery and equipment, and we knew we had to update our cow handling to include a lot of people other than just my husband and I to grow our business. Changing our philosophy from dairy as a way of life, to a dairy business, was a paradigm-changing, conscientious decision.

When we launched Quail Ridge Dairy, we went from 25 people to 75 people, most of whom spoke only Spanish. We spent a lot of time preparing to open the new facility by focusing intently on potential managers and developing training, protocols and work systems to keep everything operating smoothly. We consciously tried

to hire new employees who had potential, rather than simply a warm body. That's amazingly difficult when you add a huge new workforce. We focused on starting with good ingredients.

We asked ourselves if we were "cow" people or "people" people? Were we going to be cow-side technicians, or could we teach other people to make the same decisions we would if we could be in all places? We knew we had to figure out if we could live with mistakes and also with having to communicate all day long. It was obvious to us that we could stay in charge, with great quality control, if we didn't add people. But we also realized that our business would not lead us to prosperity in times where margins were so thin that making a profit depended on how many tiny increments of profit were put in the bucket.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, we looked at mainstream America's business structure, which include senior management, middle management and workers. As dairy farmers, we discovered we were

all of those levels! As senior managers, we determined the where and the how, developed protocols, figured out finances and talked to ourselves literally and figuratively. As middle managers, we heard what we said to ourselves and enforced our procedures. Then as workers, we went out and did the job!

When we added employees, we had to better define which owner-employees were determining our direction and pace, pass that direction to the middle managers, who must enforce and refine the procedures, and finally allow workers to do the work. Often times, that was mentally more taxing than doing the physical labor itself.

We developed a hierarchy for our employees that allow departments to operate, rather than having everyone in all places. Several studies show that people have a hard time managing more than six choices, or six employees. So, each division is limited to six people, or we make a new division. For each division, we have protocols. Our barn routine is spray, strip, wipe and attach. Our cows and calves are vaccinated and move to correct pens on certain days. We were already doing this when we were smaller, but we didn't have to communicate it to any one. As we added employees, we simply wrote them all down in an easy to read English and in Spanish bullet-point documents with implementation dates.

We also had to realize that our employees did not come pre-programmed with dairy nutrition, cow handling or health diagnosis skills. We learned from our own private mentor-parents who spent years working closely with us. We had to find ways to get that information to our people.

It occurred to us that this was no different than



FYI

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THE MANAGER

working with our children and training them for tasks. We didn't train them to set the table properly on time, with everything in the correct place, by telling them only once. We spent time working together on the protocol, talking about it, demonstrating it and helping them understand what constituted a properly set table, when it needed to happen and why.

With our farm we started by developing protocols. These are written how-to-do-it, step-by-step, bullet-point documents. It seemed only fair that we taught all of the parts that people's performance would be judged upon. And, that we could accurately repeat that training. We know employees sometimes move into another area or have life issues that call them away from our operation.

We recognized too, that they might stay for a long time, and that if we failed to teach them the protocols, we would forever fight through everyday activities, which would make the dairy a difficult place to work.

These procedures and protocols also helped the trainers we invited to customize their programs to fit our facility and standards. It provided a template for conversation, too, as outside people came in for us to review our protocols to be sure they were really what we needed, that they managed humane animal care, and that they fit with medicine withdrawal, dosage and timing.

We change the color of the dated, laminated, posted protocols sheets whenever we change protocols, to ensure everyone is working off of the same information. This is important especially when we change protocols like vaccines, weaning age or what medications to use for a particular ailment.

We realized with the amount of activities we have at the dairy that we did not have time to stop to train our employees. Then, we realized that it actually saved us time, because people actually understood the agenda for the day. For example, every Tuesday, we dried cows, weaned calves and power-steamed the calf huts.

Everyone knew what "clean" meant because we defined it, trained the new people about it and consistently reviewed the concept every few months. The middle managers appreciated the reinforcement from senior management, because they didn't have to come up with all of the action items that needed to happen.

We developed training meetings every Wednesday for 15 to 30 minutes in each facility, for each division, delivered by our staff. This was our opportunity to explain new programs, like re-ordering which pens come to the parlor to be milked, days off and to have mini-classes. We developed short trainings on how to teach a new heifer to come into the barn, proper barn cleaning, cow flight zones, proper milking techniques, personal hygiene and toilet paper disposal. Then we repeated those same classes every three months, because we discovered often times we had a lot of new faces, or had moved an employee to another division. So, while they were a great employee, they may not have had ANY training in their newly assigned position.

Because most of our staff is Spanish-speaking, and we wanted to be sure we did everything possible for them to understand and adopt our protocols, we present everything in English and Spanish. When we first began meetings in Spanish, we hired a local Spanish speaking high school student for \$25 for an hour to translate. Ultimately,

our managers had the classes so many times, they began to be able to repeat the information, handle questions and move our staff to better performance.

Just like dealing with the youngsters in our house, it was our responsibility to constantly provide learning and growing opportunities to our people. We spent A LOT of time explaining the why. "We make food for babies and children, so cleanliness is really important. These cows ensure we all get to feed our families, so herding them safely, and treating them well is important. She won't make milk if she is ill or in pain, which means there is no income for you or I."

We partnered with others, too. Colorado State University developed a program, provided in Spanish, on everything from maternity routines to milking protocols, and they provided it repeatedly. The bull studs helped us with breeding and heat detection programs. The pharmaceutical companies provided training on using their products, like hospital group management, injection methods, diagnosis and dosage.

We hung posters throughout the facility for beef quality, proper cow handling, identifying lame cows or other locomotion issues in English and Spanish. Many of these came from our local medical suppliers and industry partners.

Our upper level management people also read or listen to the CD of the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Steven Covey (available in English and Spanish at Amazon.com) to help them with prioritization skills, understand the need for learning, listening, goal setting and execution. The concepts in Covey's book helped get them on board to teach and train the rest of the staff, and to pass on what they got out of the book as well.

We also implemented an employee evaluation system to measure learning, application and teaching skills that we value. We repeat the evaluation every six months, so that we have continuous feedback on employee performance, attitude and competencies. People are evaluated by their immediate supervisor, and the next level up. Scores are composited and these determine pay increases or who to re-train or remove. The supervisors meet with employees to review the evaluation, and give constructive feedback on what the next set of improvements, new skills, or activities will be.

All of the protocol development, training and evaluations are ongoing projects. We never complete them and move on. We continually revise, update and incorporate new practices in our protocols.

Because we chose to have employees, we choose the method of communication and training that work for us, including meetings, trainings and daily interactions with our people. Ultimately, it is up to us to create effective, consistent and reliable communication tools. We had to embrace the concept of teaching and training our people before we made any headway. Once it became a priority, the rest of the jobs on the dairy became much easier!

And, while we have challenges to training, like language, culture, time and attitudes, we won't get any better at what we do if we don't help our staff understand what it is that we want and need for the business to run well.

We think of the training like eating an elephant. Seen as a giant task, it is overwhelming, but taken in small, doable bites, anyone can eat an elephant! □