

BUSINESS REINVESTMENT

By Betsy Howland

It's the people we develop who matter

“It's the people we develop who matter,” said John Mueller of Willow Bend Farm in Clifton Springs, NY. John is an operating partner at Willow Bend Farm and Spring Hope Dairy where they milk around 3,000 cows on two farms and crop about 6,000 acres. Communication, team work and staff development are key to the success of the farm that has 57 full and part-time employees in the summer months and three operating partners involved in daily management.

Each farm has its own dairy managers and cropping operations managers. Communication across farm managers and employees is key. Each farm has individual goals set by the managers and employees. These goals are communicated to the partners and employees at least monthly. Mueller originally thought this might be too many meetings. However, as their workforce grew, he recognized the value of keeping everyone on the same page. Employees

Invest in employee development to grow future managers.

have come to expect the meetings and some employees come with a list of ideas for improvement. Meetings allow time for everyone to present their ideas. Message boards are also used daily to communicate important notices to employees. Additionally, during annual performance reviews, employees are asked to list their perspective of the farm's strengths and weaknesses. Strong communication and encouraging input from employees leads to a strong team.

Because employees play a vital role to help develop goals for their farm business, Willow Bend Farm invests in development of employees who show interest, enthusiasm and performance. Opportunities are offered for further education such as Cornell Cooperative Extension meetings, feeding and crop planting workshops, Junior DAIRY LEADER, the Academy for Dairy Executives, PeopleFirst™ Human Capital Solutions through Zoetis and the Cornell Dairy Executive Program. Mueller and other managers also suggest programs for an employee to consider during their annual review to gauge an employee's interest in continuing education.

Some employees receive more benefit from programs than others, Mueller said, and it's often hard to know how much they get out of a program or how they will use the information. But, he said, one piece of additional knowledge gained is worth the investment.

Motivated employees rise to the top. Willow Bend Farm has a philosophy to “feed their employee's fire and see how far they go,” Mueller said. “All of our managers will need a successor someday.”

Grooming and retaining future leaders is a key reason the farm owners invest in their employees, and they take a long-range view. One employee, Rachel Holtz, has worked at the farm since she was 14 years old, and the farm has invested in her continuing education. First, she participated in Junior DAIRY LEADER, and then she began working with a herdsman who mentored her on weekends. After high school she chose to work full-time at the farm and now three years later she is beginning to manage the farm's high school employees.

“Rachel has great patience,” Mueller said. “This will help her in managing employees in the future.”

At Willow Bend Farm employees push the business forward.

“You can only grow your business as fast as you can grow your employees,” Mueller said. “If they are valuable to our business and have the right attitude we have a choice: they can grow within our business or go to another business. We try to keep them here.” □



Rachel Holtz, a valued member of the Willow Bend Farm team, works with youngstock.

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