

BUSINESS REINVESTMENT

By Jason Karszes, Debbie Grusenmeyer and Julie Berry

Business leadership and management development – A continual educational approach

Traditionally when reinvestment in a business is mentioned, thoughts turn to capital being invested into land, buildings, equipment, new technologies and other physical assets. While these types of investments are important, and how decisions are made to make these investments are critical, this isn't the only area of a business that investment/reinvestment occurs. As the dairy industry changes, with larger businesses, new technologies, volatility in earnings, and different business models, the skills and qualifications of the people running the business have become more critical. With an ever-increasing emphasis on the ability of the leaders and operating team of the business, this has become an important investment area on the farm.

To develop the leadership and management skills to successfully own and run a dairy farm is a life-long process. A key question for many family business owners is how to develop the necessary leadership and management skills needed, for both the current leadership team, and for the future leadership team.

As progress, technology and opportunities come more quickly for the industry, the people who are part of it need to have resources to keep abreast and embrace it. Continuing education is a key

Develop leadership and management skills for business success.

approach to accomplish this.

Continuing education can take many different forms, but regardless of the form, key benefits are associated with the process.

1) **Skills** - Dairying is one of the most complex businesses to run, from understanding animal and plant biology, economics, human resources, engineering, operations management, accounting and myriad other skills. As people's roles change within

the business, and the actual business changes, new skills need to be learned.

Examples: How to create custom reports within software programs? How to prepare a partial budget? How to use to-do lists to organize your day? How to improve listening skills? How to run a team meeting?

At Mapleview Dairy in Madrid, NY, continuing education is expected, although the particular path follows the interest of the individual. Community engagement and service are also strongly valued.

"Grandpa and Grandma went to college in the 1930's. They met at college. It wasn't a question of education. It was a question of what you were going to do," said Lou Anne King, who owns the farm with her brother David Fisher.

Lou Anne's children Sara, Kristin, Laurie and Jennifer all have attended or are in college and have varying levels of interest in the agriculture industry. David's sons Jake and Jordan are college graduates and have both returned to the farm.

"We want to teach them to be good, honest, hard working people," said David, who currently serves as NY Farm Bureau state director for District 7. "It's important to keep doing different things. Things register at different points in your life, so you keep doing it and exposing yourself. You can't quit learning. It's a bad day if you didn't learn."



The Fisher family, Mapleview Dairy, Madrid, NY. Photo credit: Bob Eddy.

Continued on page 25

2) Exposure – With the amount of time and effort required to run a dairy business, it is very easy to become centered on the farm and how the owners and managers function, and to be in a comfort zone. However, if not enough time is spent outside of the business, is opportunity being missed? Is every dollar being captured? Are all approaches being considered? Could a challenge be addressed in a different manner?

With a focus on continuing education, the opportunities to build a network, hear how others addressed issues, and collect tidbits of advice all have long-term value. Even though there might not be value right away, when something comes up in the future, there is a greater trove of thoughts to draw from when thinking of solutions, making decision and pursuing opportunity.

Lou Anne's daughter Jennifer King graduated from the Jr. DAIRY LEADER program in 2014, and is currently a freshman at Cornell.

"I learned to embrace myself. I think it's a great opportunity unlike any other. It really helped me get one step ahead to figure out what I want to do in the dairy industry," she said. "I wanted to learn more about myself, to meet people, to make contacts at companies."

Through the Cornell Dairy Executive Program (CDEP), King said that although their farm is somewhat geographically isolated, they have developed contacts around the state and the industry. King also participated in TEPAP (The Executive Program for Dairy Producers) through Texas A&M. David is a LEAD NY graduate and a graduate of CDEP. His son Jordan, who manages on-farm safety and other trainings, the parlor and youngstock, is in the current CDEP class.

"It's important to be exposed to what other people are doing," Fisher said. "It's important to get away and talk to other people who are excited and to surround yourself with people who you perceive to be the best."

And, he said, as fewer people farm, that exposure includes engagement with the local community. Maplevue owners and employees are volunteers with their local fire department and have served in various leadership positions in their town and community. King currently serves on six advisory boards. "That's especially important," Fisher said. "Even more today than 30 years ago."

3) Confidence – One of the most important attributes to lead a business and the most important outcome associated with continuing education.

With uncertainty that grows from the rapidly changing dairy industry, it is hard to know what may need to be overcome in the future. What will the dairy business look like? What skills will be needed? What decisions will be made? While no one knows what may happen tomorrow, next month, next year, or in 10 years, those who have confidence in their management and leadership abilities can effectively lead their business through this uncertainty.

Confidence can come from knowing yourself and your natural talents, said King and Fisher. Understanding personality types, both their own and their employees, helps build a more effective team. This awareness is especially important, Fisher said, as he moved from spending much of his time on hands-on tasks, which is his

natural preference, into a management role.

"You can't get away from your default. You have to find balance," Fisher said. "The hardest thing is to watch people stumble and learn, but that's part of the process. You have to let them make decisions and make mistakes. It's a sense of accomplishment trying to see a good job done. I'm trying to learn and grow and teach people."

King said that having worked off-farm jobs before returning to the farm can help grow skills and exposure.

4) Open-minded – With continuing education comes new ideas and different ways of doing things. This can be difficult sometimes because it often leads to change. It is human nature to shy away from change and the challenges associated with change. Be open to new ideas and different ways and the strength it can bring to the business and management team.

Part of being open-minded is learning to delegate, said King, and being open to support the ideas of the next generation. And, she said, she feels a responsibility to support their employees.

"There's 30 to 35 families that get support from the farm. It's knowing that someone else wants to keep it going because it's part of the tradition."

While at Cornell University Jordan took time to complete a semester at California Polytechnic University and then completed internships on dairy farms in Texas and Georgia.

"I was lucky enough to see a lot of things and do a lot of things and I wanted to come home and do it with my family," Jordan said.

Pursuing different educational paths over time can increase confidence, build skill sets and provide exposure. The key is to actively think about what areas to address, what opportunities there may be to pursue, and what the timeline may be. Consider these opportunities to gain skills, exposure and confidence:

- Mentors
- Internships
- College degrees
- Courses at community college
- Extension programs
- Industry-lead training programs
- Advisory teams
- Subscriptions to newspapers/magazines
- Employment in other industries
- Farm and business tours
- Youth programs outside of high school
- Certificate programs
- On-the-job experience
- Online courses and program □

Jason Karszes (jk57@cornell.edu) is a Senior Farm Management Associate with PRO-DAIRY. Debbie Grusenmeyer (djc27@cornell.edu) is a Senior Extension Associate and coordinates youth programs for PRO-DAIRY. Julie Berry (jrb7@cornell.edu) is Communications Manager for PRO-DAIRY.