



Safe, productive and engaged from day one

By Richard Stup

“Hello...er...what was your name again? Yeah, Pete, that’s right. We’re sure glad to have you starting today, two guys left last week and I did most of the milking over the weekend. Put your stuff down over there, here’s a pair of gloves, let’s get in the parlor. Juan’s been on since 8 p.m. last night, and he’s gotta be exhausted. I’ll introduce you around some other time, and we’ll do your paperwork up at the house this afternoon. Right now we need to get some work done!”

– or –

“Good Morning Jasmine, welcome to Lakewater Dairy. We are glad to have you starting today, and I know you’re eager to work with the cows, but the fact is that you and this job are really important. We need to go over a number of different things before you start work because we want you to be safe and ready to do a great job. We have a really good team of people here, and we all want you to be successful. We call our program for new team members ‘Lakewater Onboarding,’ let’s go into the office and I’ll tell you about it.”

WHAT IS AN ONBOARDING PROGRAM?

The first moments an employee experiences at a new job set the tone. Pete got pushed right into the parlor as soon as he got out of his car. His welcome clearly wasn’t important but getting the job done today surely was. Jasmine got a very different welcome. The spotlight was on her and the importance of helping her get started right. Which experience would you want your daughter to have at her first job? Which experience do your employees have when they start with you?

Employees are critical to the survival and success of every business, and they’ve never been harder to find. It’s critical for dairies to bring new employees onboard so that they will be safe, productive and **engaged from**

day one. Starting out right increases the chance that your new employee will perform well, connect with the team, and enjoy a long employment relationship.

A team of industry professionals and dairy farm managers from New York’s Agricultural Workforce Development Council is developing a model onboarding program that farms can adapt. The program has four clear goals:

- 1** Safety. Identify safety hazards on the farm that the new employee will encounter and how to work safely.
- 2** Productivity. Increase new employee confidence and performance to achieve standard productivity levels within two weeks of the hire date.
- 3** Professionalism. Demonstrate to the new employee that this farm is a professional workplace.
- 4** Engagement and Retention. Retain average- or excellent-performing employees for at least two years.

PLANNED STAGES OF ONBOARDING

It’s easy to overwhelm a new employee just with the paperwork that must be completed right away. Add to that safety and job training, orientation to a new place, and socialization with co-workers, and the first day at work can feel like being caught in an information avalanche. An onboarding program takes into account a person’s limited ability to absorb information. Human minds can only learn or absorb so much information each day. Rest and sleep are required to file away information in the brain and prepare for a new day of learning. Onboarding activities are staged out over three important time periods for the new employee: Day One, Week One and Month One.

Day One is already cluttered by regulations. Paperwork such as

work agreements, disclosures, work authorization, benefit and tax documents are mandated to be completed. The onboarding program acknowledges these legal necessities and provides guidance to help ensure they are completed accurately. Safety is another key factor in Day One. Many safety issues must be covered right away because employees will immediately encounter hazards when any work begins. Basic work procedure training begins on Day One and, for some employees, an orientation to farm-provided housing is also on the agenda.

Week One continues many themes, but the emphasis shifts to procedure training and safety. Your farm needs to have a plan for highly effective training during days two through seven of that critical first week.

Month One represents the end of onboarding for most farm positions. By the time an employee has worked for a month, he should be performing up to standard in the procedures that form the main part of his job. Effective training is followed by performance feedback and common-sense evaluation to ensure that the employee has learned and mastered the basics.

EFFECTIVE TRAINING

People learn in different ways and at different rates. People who perform as trainers need to master some basic training techniques. The Tell-Show-Do-Review method works for most learners because it addresses learning styles such as seeing, hearing and practicing. The trainer begins by telling the employee how to do each step in the task. The next step is to physically show the learner how to do the task while the learner watches. After that, the learner gets a chance to do the task herself. Finally, the trainer reviews the learner’s work and gives feedback on her performance. Steps done

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GET TO KNOW CORNELL'S NEW AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST RICHARD STUP

Agriculture is hard-pressed by workforce issues. Recognizing this challenge, New York's industry invested and established an Agricultural Workforce Development program at Cornell University and hired Richard Stup as an agricultural workforce specialist. Stup's role is to provide leadership for educational programs in human resource management and to conduct applied research that addresses challenges facing the agricultural industry. His focus is on enhancing employee commitment, regulatory compliance and leadership development at the farm level.

Prior to joining Cornell, Stup founded Ag Workforce Development, a firm focused on improving individual and team performance through organization development

and technology solutions. Before that he served agriculture with Farm Credit as a branch manager and member of the senior leadership team. During his Farm Credit career, Richard provided leadership to a diverse set of teams that included sales, credit, accounting and records, business consulting, risk management and crop insurance. Earlier in his career, Richard was an extension specialist with Penn State University, where he led the Dairy Alliance team and developed award-winning programming in human resource management. He earned his doctorate from Penn State in the field of Workforce Education and Development, including innovative research into the effects of human resource management on employee organizational commitment.

The Cornell Agricultural Workforce Development program provides leadership to develop outstanding farm employee



Richard Stup, Cornell Agricultural Workforce Specialist, with Tim and Kirsty Northrop, Lawnel Farms, New York.

managers, compliance with employment regulations and to create great places to work in farms and agribusinesses.

Sign up for the *Ag Workforce Journal*, a publication that provides regular features and updates on ag workforce issues, online at agworkforce.cals.cornell.edu. Recent topics include: farm-provided worker housing, sexual harassment prevention policies and training, more effective communications and preparing for ICE I-9 Audits.

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well are reinforced with praise. Steps that should be improved require the trainer to tell and show again. Thus we have: Tell, Show, Do, Review. Effective trainers cycle smoothly through this pattern during the training process as the learner comes up to speed.

PROFESSIONAL IMPRESSION

The image of agricultural employment among the general public is unflattering. People hear farm work and they think long hours, low pay, and dirty work. Even worse, they think of farm work as jobs of last resort. In reality, farm jobs offer competitive pay, room for growth, and an opportunity to do real, meaningful work. New employee onboarding gives farms a chance to demonstrate professionalism and to focus employees on the importance and meaning of their new job. Professional employers will also complete required paperwork timely and deliver needed

safety training to prevent injuries, all practices that lead to long-term workforce and business success.

WHO DOES THE ONBOARDING?

Making that professional impression on new employees can't be done by just anyone. Three roles should be represented in the onboarding process. First, the ownership role should make an appearance to welcome each new employee on their first day. Only ownership can really emphasize the point that the new employee is highly valued. Second, the new employee's supervisor should be present on Day One. The supervisor will be critical to the new employee, so he or she must greet the new person and offer a warm welcome. Third, a specially designated trainer needs to take part in new employee onboarding. Don't delegate training to whoever is working the current shift. Instead, identify a specific

individual with the skills and patience to effectively teach the new person how to be successful. In some farms, one person might fill all three roles and that's just fine. The point is to welcome the new employee with the authority and importance of ownership, connect them with their future supervisor, and entrust them to someone who can effectively teach how to succeed at their job.

Onboarding is an important part of employee-focused human resource management. Successful farms recognize the pivotal role that employees play in business success. Onboarding is the way to focus on new employees and ensure they are safe, productive and engaged from day one. ■

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