

THE MANAGER

INDUSTRY GROWTH

By Dr. Paula Ospina and Thomas R. Maloney

Understanding and meeting employee expectations creates a strong business foundation

Managing people in an expanding dairy

One of the most often overlooked changes when expanding past a critical CAFO cow number like 199 or 699 cows is the need for a more formalized human resource practices.

Farms with 199 cows were the first size that hired labor exceeded farm labor, according to the 2010 Dairy Farm Business Summary. The summary showed that hired labor was 67% and family labor was 33%. In farms with more than 699 cows, the percent of hired labor was 81%, and family labor was 19%. Farms with more than 1300 cows had 7% family labor.

Paying more attention to human resource management does not mean you have to add another person to your staff. It does mean as a manager you should spend more time communicating with and supervising your workers so that things are done the way you want them done. Managing people is perhaps one of the most important jobs in the industry because it affects how your cows are milked, fed, and treated.

If you meet your employee's expectations they are more likely to help you meet your goals.

The Top 10 Things Employees Expect from You are:

1. Employees expect to know what their job is. The first thing to do is to write down job descriptions and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). A specific job description will help you hire the right person for the job and SOPs

will help make sure your employees understand how to do the job once hired. In addition, writing these details creates the opportunity for you to think carefully about what the job requires.

a. It might be important to consider having the SOPs translated so that everyone can understand exactly what is expected. One example of grave miscommunication due to a language barrier was a herdsman who was treating cows that did not need treatment and ignoring those that did. The farm started using a different test for ketosis and he did not understand how it worked. He gave propylene glycol to cows that did not need it, and skipped the ones that did.

b. Although certain aspects of each job may be specific to your farm, there may also be a lot of similarities between farms. Consider talking with your neighbors and friends and asking what to include in a job description.

c. If you are interested in translating SOPs, identify a bilingual educator or agribusiness professional who understands the dairy business, to provide the translation.

2. Employees value training. All employees, even those who have worked on other farms, should have training. The training should be standardized and given by a properly trained employee or manager. Having a plan for training each task will help ensure that training is done consistently.

3. Employees want to know whom they report. It is important

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to make sure that each person has only one supervisor. It is also important to note that if you have employees whose first language is not English, and who feel more comfortable speaking their native language, the person who helps with translation may be very influential. Be attentive to this situation, and make sure you are comfortable with that person's leadership.

4. Employees want to know how they are doing. Providing continuous feedback is important because employees will be accustomed to this type of interaction and when a behavior needs to be corrected the conversation will be positive and constructive.

5. Employees want to know the rewards for top performance. It is also critical that employees understand what performance is necessary to earn incentives, such as quality bonuses.

6. Employees want to know where the organization is going. Employees should have easy access to the farm's quality reports and they should be updated on the goals of the business. Monthly meetings are a great way to communicate business goals. For example, if you are planning to expand and will have some overcrowding issues, it is important that your employees understand what is happening, the timeline, and how it will affect their job requirements.

7. Employees want access to production information. It is important to promote strong internal communication and provide practical information on production and

quality. For example, the milking crew should be aware of the somatic cell count, while the maternity pen group should have information on dead on arrival and dystocias. Charts displayed in the break room or offices that can be updated on a monthly basis are a great way to share this information.

8. Employees want management's support, respect and encouragement. Although it may be difficult to let go of jobs that you are used to doing, giving a properly trained employee autonomy and the power to make decisions may go a long way to foster a culture of success. This shows support, respect and encouragement.

9. Employees want employers to recognize that they have a life outside of work. Although work on a dairy is demanding, providing some time off and flexible hours on a case by case basis, will help maintain the positive atmosphere that is essential to a successful business.

10. Employees want problem employees dealt with decisively and quickly. Although it can be difficult to confront a problem employee, the faster you take decisive action, the easier it will be for everyone involved. The critical part is that you have to be fair and consistent with discipline. Consequences of failure to comply with workplace rules should be clearly communicated.

By following these 10 simple guidelines, you will have a very good foundation for the human resource effort within your business.

Preparing your dairy farm for the future from an environmental...
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extreme cases, bunks or portions of them were abandoned because there wasn't room to do a proper job with collecting and treating leachate or runoff.

Manure storage. At least one eastern state has a winter spreading ban, and USDA and many other states, are taking a closer look at this practice. While it is far from clear that every farm will be required to store manure, it makes sense to take a look and see if it could work for your operation. Can you get cost sharing? Will it work with your manure and bedding source? Can you handle the shift in workload? Are there custom haulers available? As important, where could storage be located and how does it fit in your farmstead plan? Will you be sorry you put the new heifer barn in a spot that would really have been better location for manure storage five years down the road? Or, the other way around, did you put manure storage in a place that would really look good for a cow barn in five years?

Barnyards or "pastures"? By most definitions, pastures should have green, vigorous vegetation during the growing season as long as rainfall is adequate. Often, overstocked pastures turn into dirt lots. Even good pastures will have small areas where heavy use prevents grass from thriving, but some farms have acres of dirt lots. At a minimum, these areas should be separated from streams by healthy grass to help filter the runoff. Better yet, match stocking rate to the pasture productivity, keep feeding areas away from streams and move them around to give vegetation a chance to recover.

Fields:

Take care of your soil and it will take care of you. Regular soil sampling, good crop rotation, reduced tillage, cover crops, strips, sod waterways and contours will help to deliver good yields and reduce off-farm impacts at the same time.

Whether you are buying, selling or staying the same, farms where fertilizer and manure have been well-managed will be more desirable than those that have not. This means that fields are well-balanced across the land-base, the manager has made efforts to distribute manure widely. Soil test P is medium to high, maybe some very high. Fields testing very high or excessive for P are starting to be viewed as potential problems and may not be able to receive manure in the future. Clearly that is a problem if you have many of these fields and have cows or other livestock. Take action now to manage P in rations, limit P fertilizer only to where necessary, limit or eliminate manure imports from neighbors; if you already have plenty of your own manure, try to find export opportunities. A good nutrient management plan based on regular soil testing and sound agronomy will help tremendously with this and make some money too.

Many public and private sector experts can help a farmer evaluate their current circumstance and identify farmstead conservation practices. Not as many folks can help with a general farmstead plan. You should put together a team of trusted advisors to help with this -- maybe another farmer, nutritionist or veterinarian. Look for folks who have seen other operations and can bring good ideas to the table. Unless you are certain the next generation is not going to be part of your farm, do them a favor and plan ahead! ☐