

Core Values: What they are and how to establish them

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Core Values. We all have them. They are guiding principles for how you live your life. Today, some dairies are defining and redefining their Core Values, and asking employees to participate in the process. These dairies will use Core Values as their compass to carry out daily activities and make decisions.

“Ensure you and your business are in alignment in practice for success. Core Values will help you navigate through challenging times and even act as anchors in the midst of uncertainty,” writes Sharon Harris’s in “Three steps to establish authentic core values.”

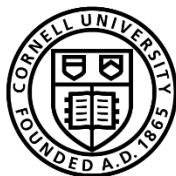
I have had the opportunity to shepherd the process of developing Core Values for a few dairies in New York. In defining and redefining Core Values, the dairy’s leadership team must agree to the process and realize the value of adopting Core Values as their compass. Core Values are actionable and ultimately will become non-negotiable.

Countless articles and research are available that highlight the benefits of redefining or establishing Core Values for your organization. Benefits of using Core Values include:

- Assists in defining your organization’s culture
- Facilitates decision making
- Provides key tools for recruiting and retention
- Influences behaviors
- Allows organizations to differentiate themselves

For all businesses, sorting through the potential labor pool in today’s labor market, with the high cost of replacing staff and hiring replacements, is a challenge. Establishing Core Values can attract employees and sharing Core Values can foster loyalty. “A company’s productivity increases when it attracts like-minded employees who share its values. Companies that abide by their values demonstrate integrity, which is an essential tool to foster loyalty,” according to [“The power of company Core Values.”](#)

By establishing and bringing Core Values to life, a business becomes more efficient at carrying out daily activities, problem solving, and making decisions. The key to developing and embracing Core Values in your organization is to involve all stakeholders in the process, and then to reinforce habits and actions that encourage all to live the established Core Values.



Core Values differ from a mission or vision statement by becoming the principles that guide all decision-making. Your mission is a brief statement that describes what your organization does. The vision statement is a longer view of what you want to achieve.

The farm leader plays a key role in recognizing the value of how redefining or establishing Core Values benefits the organization. An organization should have a group of words with meanings that can be recalled and acted upon. Having too many Core Values prevents focus -- five to six are recommended. Less is better. Core Values should be clear, concise, and easy to remember.

We followed these steps to establish a set of Core Values:

1. The leader invites stakeholders who are important to the business's success. Limit the group to five to eight stakeholders, including the leader.
2. Each process starts with a meeting to establish ground rules.
3. Each person shares their values and what they feel are lived by the organization. In many situations Core Values are understood but not spelled out or used daily. Keep in mind what is non-negotiable and what calls you to action.
4. During the next session, everyone again shares new or similar words or meanings they heard or thought about in the time since the last discovery session.
5. Continue to share what you have heard with everyone, gaining feedback as you go. Make sure the process is inclusive and engages all stakeholders. Capture feedback from staff, suppliers, consultants, neighbors, and friends.
6. Work to reduce and combine the key words or values from what is listed, grouping similar terms with similar meanings.
7. Clarify the Core Values and establish phrases that resonate and explain the purpose of each Core Value. **A critical component is to verify that the words chosen are understood by all employees and cultures at your dairy.**
8. Test drive Core Values with staff and stakeholders, recognizing that Core Values may need to be refined to better communicate your intent. This is where you may choose to change your list of Core Values to fit each situation.
9. A minimum of four meetings with the central group are required, with each session lasting approximately two hours. Remember this is a process, and individuals change and adapt at different rates. Time and action are required to bring each Core Value to life.

For Core Values to be embodied, they must be incorporated into all actions or activities by all employees and answer the following questions.

- Are they actionable?
- Can they be attained?
- Are they memorable?
- Can everyone live by them?

Core Values need to be clear, concise, and easy to remember. Create ways to share each value and help all employees understand each of them as intended. Sharing stories helps others see the value. Remember to highlight someone living a Core Value. For example, “Juan stayed after his milking shift to assist the crop team cover the bunk. This demonstrates teamwork and/or a person who exceeds expectations.”

Bringing Core Values to life will not be a one and done activity or a directive from leadership. Putting Core Values into play will require some changes across the organization. The easy part may be to identify the values. The real work, and ultimately the value of the discussions, will be how you work to incorporate the Core Values into your daily activities and meetings.

Core Values will only become part of and benefit the organization if they are lived daily by all stakeholders. **Core Values are NON-NEGOTIABLE.**