



Taking Care of Cows by Taking Care of People, Understanding the Dairy Labor Conundrum

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Take home messages

- The U.S. dairy workforce is evolving rapidly: multicultural, multilinguistic, with ergonomic challenges more than ever before.
- Dairy managers typically are promoted because they excel at managing cows: learning people managing skills is the challenge.
- Successful dairy operations seem to be those that have successfully navigated the workforce development and training conundrum.

Introduction

As the dairy landscape continues to evolve through consolidation and dairy expansion, we are witnessing a rapid evolving dairy workforce landscape. Labor continues to be the number one challenge on dairies, specifically human resource development. Where dairy owners and managers historically were challenged with training and educating a largely foreign-born workforce originating primarily from Mexico, with the sharp increase in number of workers from Central America, we have now added another layer of challenges to the mix. Many producers may not even realize the extent to which this is occurring on their farms and what the implications of that change are for workforce training and development, but also in terms of workplace safety. The goal of this article is to shine some light on these developments and provide producers with information on how to continue to focus on getting the best from their employees.

Labor: The number one challenge on dairies

The number of books written on (effective) workforce development is simply staggering, however by just adding the word “dairy” in the search engine, that number dwindles down to exactly zero. There are few available resources for dairy workforce development. But ask any given dairy producer about their number one challenge outside of the “non-controllable” such as feed- and milk prices, the unanimous response is labor, and more specifically managing or developing that resource. This is no different outside of dairying: hiring, training, and developing the right employees for any business is generally considered one of the toughest challenges.

Focus: Taking care of people taking care of cows

When evaluating the success of dairy operations in today's paper-thin economic environment, it appears that dairy operations that are successful in getting the best from their employees and therefore their cows, seem to do well. Since there are no good metrics or benchmarks to compare the level of success in "motivating people to do the right thing" or "giving 100% every time, all the time", I can't support that statement with any numbers. However, as I speak about this subject with producers all over the country, I do seem to receive overwhelming agreement for this subjective measure. And it makes sense: taking care of people taking care of cows should be the primary focus of management. So why is this so difficult, and what do we need to do to become proficient in that department? This is not an indictment of managers, but a simple realization that managing people is simply much more difficult than managing cows!

Developing people managers: It's not the dairy manager's fault

Dairy managers were and continue to be first and foremost successful cow managers, oftentimes promoted from within because they excelled at the technical part of their jobs: taking care of cows. The question that needs to be asked is: Will a good milker, breeder, feeder, or outside worker make a good people manager? Many new managers have failed at managing people, became frustrated, and left the organization to go back to what they were good at: Taking care of cows. Many growing dairy operations have been unable to continue to grow because they were unable to find or develop good middle managers from within.

Again, this is not to be critical of managers, because is not anybody's mistake or fault. Where did dairy managers go to learn how to manage people? Most dairy owners and managers learned how to manage cows in technical programs, schools, or college and through practical experience. On the other hand, how many dairy owners or managers went to school to specifically take classes on managing people? Or alternatively, how many producers were in a position to bring in outside HR managers, people with little dairy knowledge, simply to help develop a workforce training program? Except for learning as we go and trial and error, few current owners and managers obtained any formal education on managing people. Recognizing this is step one in becoming better, it is not your dairy manager's fault.

Does my personality get in the way?

Secondly, if we were to conduct a Meyers-Briggs personality test amongst dairy owners and managers to see what the predominant personal strengths are, it is likely that few will fit the preferred manager profile, with a delegating, motivating, coaching-minded CEO personality. Many working in agriculture possesses personality traits that allow them to be strong individuals, "the doers", flexible with common sense, based on experience, without a lot of patience for nonsense, and if it takes any more than 30 seconds to explain something, they likely will take over and do it themselves.

That's two strikes: One, people management was learned by experience, and two, personality interferes. The younger generation entering the dairy business is somewhat different. This group of young managers is generally much better at working with people because they grew up around the dairy, working with and learning from workers from many different backgrounds, learning the customs, the language, and the culture, and are typically much more comfortable in a leadership role managing people on the dairy.

Recognizing your real workforce

There is a third strike: Understanding your audience or in this case your workforce. Our dairy workforce is primarily foreign born, speaks a different first language, is culturally different, and generally has limited agricultural and animal handling experience when starting to work on a dairy. Even though this is nothing new, these facts are oftentimes cited as the primary barriers for effective workforce development and training. Recent data from our dairy safety and animal handling trainings throughout the US shows some fascinating trends.

Traditionally, the majority of the foreign-born dairy workers, (>90%), originated from Mexico and identified culturally as Hispanic. This is changing fast. Data collected during trainings indicate that in the Southwest up to 45% of the workers on dairies and an even higher percentage on calf raising facilities, originate from Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) and identifies as indigenous or of Mayan descent. Instead of understanding the complexities of managing two different cultures and languages on the dairy, producers are now trying to work with three cultures, three languages and three statures.

Workers from Central American countries may or may not speak Spanish depending on where they came from and if they received any schooling. Many Central American workers originating from the countryside with limited or no schooling, typically speak one of the many different Mayan languages, of which K'iche is the most prominent, and usually know very limited or no Spanish. They identify culturally as from Mayan descent, a culture that is very different from the familiar Hispanic culture of workers originating from the northern parts of Mexico. In addition, the stature of workers from Mayan descent is typically significantly smaller than that of Hispanic or Anglo descent. These workers therefore may have more difficulty as milkers reaching the udder or the control panel in the parlor, or as breeders inseminating cows, tasks easier performed by taller workers. Another potential challenge is that milkers with shorter statures must reach higher for a prolonged period and as a result may fatigue sooner, a potential safety concern. Research is under way in that area to determine to what extent that affects performance.

What does this mean for my dairy?

Owners and managers are usually very aware of the challenges presented by managing employees from different cultures and languages. However, this just became infinitely more complicated by adding a third language, a third culture, and a third stature to the mix. The real questions are how do these workers relate to the other cultures? Are there cultural issues between workers from the Hispanic and the Mayan cultures? Are we aware of those issues or is that an invisible piece of the iceberg? Does this explain some of the workforce issues that seem difficult to address? Where can one find information to learn about or address these issues?

How well can workers perform their jobs if training is only provided in Spanish or English and there is limited recognition for the differences between Hispanic and indigenous cultures? For one, until recently, most Mayan cultures did not have a written language. Do the employees even read? What does that mean in terms of understanding or comprehension when we provide written SOPs or other documents in Spanish? Or any written material for that matter? What about the real effectiveness of training if all trainings are in Spanish, but there is a large percentage of non-Spanish speaking employees? Who is doing the translating to the Central American workers and what do they truly comprehend? What else is being overlooked in this complicated picture?

This is what is meant by knowing your audience. Do we really know and understand non-English speaking dairy employees and how to adequately communicate with them? Can the dairy manager really get the best from their employees if they do not know how to validate their employees' values? It is commonly accepted that the best work comes from workers who feel validated and respected by their superiors. By workers that receive appropriate feedback on their performance and are encouraged or coached in the process to become better at what it is they do. Are dairy managers doing that effectively not realizing or understanding the mixed bag of issues they are dealing with?

Characteristics of profitable dairies

As a final, likely rhetorical, is the difference between the "top 25% dairies" in comparison to the other 75% of dairies solely based on differences in cow genetics or feed quality and other cow related metrics? Or is the difference between profitable and not-so profitable operations based on how owners and managers are successful in adequately developing their workforce, evaluating performance, providing timely feedback, and setting the bar higher for improvement while recognizing and validating the unique blend of cultural differences and backgrounds that exists in their workforce? Certainly, the consequences of the U.S. failed immigration system are not helpful in giving managers a fair opportunity to fully endorse and implement a solid workforce development program. But, despite the failed system, there are many things that can be done, beginning by recognizing differences, identifying cultural, linguistic, or even ergonomic bottle necks; learning more about the uniqueness of our workforce; and by validating people for who they are and the value they bring to the workplace. This means for most manager personalities getting out of one's comfort zone. It will likely bring many challenges associated with these differences to the service and can make us uneasy about how to handle them (remember it is easier to manage cows...). But without attempting this, there is no other way than to continue to do "business as usual", with predictable outcomes considering undeniable industry trends.

You are not alone: Resources

Many producers, owners, and managers, for reasons described above find it extremely challenging to develop a successful and effective worker training and evaluation program. It is easier to tell Jose to make sure that Juan knows what to do, without teaching Juan the why. These challenges are recognized by industry leadership and the [NMPF FARM Program](#) has developed and collected a series of resources and tools to be utilized on the dairy farm. Many of the resources have been translated in Spanish but also into K'iche, and they are all available for use or download from the [NMPF FARM Program](#) website. Many Extension programs in New Mexico and elsewhere, including [NMSU's Dairy Extension Program](#), have developed additional resources pertinent to their regional or state situations. A simple internet search will get you there.

**NMSU Winter Holiday -
December 24,2021 - January 3,2022
(stay safe & healthy)**



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have a Merry Christmas and a
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