

# PEOPLE WHO GROW PEOPLE HAVE BETTER FARMS

by Charles E. Gardner, D.V.M

ARE you a worker or a manager?

The answer to this question for almost all of you is "some of each."

The real question is "do you allocate the right amount of time and energy to each?"

The answer to that question depends on your farm situation. The more people you supervise, the more time you need to devote to them. And with people, leadership is a better term than management.

In my career, I had the experience of working for a large company that went bankrupt and another large company that was very successful. There were many differences in the overall management of these two companies, and one of the largest was in leadership of employees.

Supervisors in the successful company spent much more time with their people. This time was devoted to developing job descriptions, defining expectations (setting goals), and providing feedback.

Most dairy farmers or farm managers have little training in people leadership. You don't feel comfortable or confident in this area, so you tend to ignore it and devote more time to hands-on work. You may find that it is easier to do something yourself than to get someone else to do it.

If this is true, you will benefit by re-orienting your approach. You can multiply your time invested many times over if you develop an employee who regularly does superior work compared to doing that work yourself day after day. With several employees, this effect is really dramatic, to the point of determining the success or failure of your operation.

## KEEP ON LEARNING

Recently, I attended the Pennsylvania Dairy Summit along with approximately 500 other people. Roughly half were dairy producers, the rest industry representatives. Among the producers were the "best and the brightest" of Pennsylvania's and other states' dairy farmers. They recognize that part of being an effective manager is continuing education, constantly seeking new ideas and better ways of doing things.

At both the general sessions and at small group breakouts, the presenters focused on the importance of providing strong leadership. This is done with structured communication. Training, defining expectations, and feedback all require that you meet and talk to your workers. Regular team meetings help keep everyone informed of how the farm is doing and where improvement is needed.

One concept I heard over and over, from both producers and advisers, was the recommendation to use advisory teams, often referred to as profit teams. These teams consist of key farm advisers, key farm employees, family members, and someone to serve as facilitator.

The advisers almost always include the nutritionist and veterinarian. The accountant and/or banker are often involved. Another respected producer may be a part of it, as well as any other person who has useful knowledge.

They meet as often as monthly and as seldom as twice a year. The frequency of the meetings depends largely on the stability of the farm. Operations that are seeking to make major changes meet more often.

## FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Farm leadership also involves long-term planning for the farm's continuation. It is a harsh fact that the operation of a successful dairy farm means ever increasing efficiency. Your farm must do this because the industry is doing it. In some way, shape or form, your neighbors are finding ways to get more production from fewer resources. How will you do the same in the years to come? Finding ways to become more efficient is a key aspect of long-term management.

For some of you, this will involve milking more cows to capture the economies of scale. Yet, before you consider this, you are best served to seek ways to improve your current operation.

Get better before getting bigger is a cliché, and a wise one. Can you improve udder health, reproduction, calf health, feed costs, culling, or any of the many more aspects of herd performance? The best managers are always looking for opportunities for small yet continual improvement.

Many of you chose to be a dairy farmer because you enjoy the work itself. Feeding cows, delivering calves, helping a sick animal, chopping silage, and perhaps even milking cows gives you satisfaction. For some of you, these are still your primary activities. Management activities are less natural, yet extremely important. The larger your operation, the more you need to become a manager instead of a doer.