



Employee management is one of the most challenging aspects of running any business. The challenges are compounded in agriculture, including the dairy industry. First there are the typical challenges – long hours, sometimes extreme conditions, hard physical work, etc. In addition, there are other challenges that do not relate to the work itself.

A majority of the agricultural employees in the U.S., including a majority of dairy workers, are immigrants of Hispanic origin. With increasing immigration enforcement, retention of good employees is more important than ever.

In my employee training role at Diamond V, I work with dairies of varying sizes in different regions of the country. I often engage in candid conversations with employees about their challenges and frustrations working on the farm. I find that their concerns are the same as employees in any industry. For the most part, frustrations for dairy employees fit into two broad categories: Lack of clarity; and, a perceived lack of fairness.

In other words, many dairy workers don't always know what is expected of them, and, they sometimes feel they are not being treated fairly.

Lack of clarity

Most employees on dairy farms take pride in their work and want to do a good job. However, if we, as owners or managers, have not defined our expectations of what a "good" job is, or if we have not effectively communicated job responsibilities, work flow, etc., then we are setting our employees up for failure, and setting ourselves up for disappointment. I have sat many times with frustrated dairy managers and

Clarity and Fairness: Key Factors in Employee Satisfaction



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owners who make the statement: "They should just know that this is important;" or, "This is so obvious."

With follow-up questioning – often involving the employee as well as the owner – usually I find that expectations have not been communicated clearly. One key point to remember is that just because something seems obvious and "common sense" to us in the management role, we cannot assume that it is common sense for the employee, especially if they have not worked in agriculture previously.

Perceived lack of fairness

Everyone wants to feel like they are being treated fairly. Much of the conflict and personal issues I encounter on dairy farms is a perception – sometimes real and sometimes not – that other employees are given an unfair advantage. This may revolve around their gender or ethnicity, or it may be a perception that the boss has a favorite employee who does not have to follow the same rules as everyone else.

Treating employees fairly means treating everyone appropriately for the skills and energy that they bring to a similar role. Being able to articulate this point to members of a milking crew, for example, is a great communication opportunity for managers. Helping employees understand how to succeed and advance in a given position is critical for harmony in the workplace. It also creates training opportunities for members of the team who want to develop additional skills, gain responsibilities, and merit pay raises.

So, how do we provide employees with job clarity and a sense of fairness? Three important tools help to clearly communicate expectations and policies to employees: Employee handbooks, job descriptions, and protocols/SOPs.

Three management tools

Human resources (HR) documents are not fun to write. Most folks would rather be out working with cows or strategically planning their business. However, if these documents are done right and used as intended (not collecting dust in the corner, last updated 10 years ago), then they can really make the day-to-day work of the dairy more efficient and help reduce employee turnover.

- 1. Employee Handbook:** The Employee Handbook is a guide to everything about your dairy – a sort of operational "bible." In the reference section below, there are links to help create an employee handbook. The handbook serves multiple purposes, but a few are:
 - Introducing the new employee to the culture of your dairy, including your mission statement and a brief history and description of the dairy;
 - Providing a code of conduct, including rules for proper attire, animal abuse policies, information about clocking in/out, starting and ending shifts, meal and break periods, expectations of proper behavior, and list of unacceptable behaviors (tardy and no shows, alcohol and drug use,

- fighting, etc.) as well as disciplinary policies regarding unacceptable behaviors;
- Providing information about pay periods, vacation policy, health insurance (if offered), and other items of legal importance (discrimination, sexual harassment, grievance and conflict policies and procedures, etc.).

The employee handbook provides clear, concise information about your expectations in the employee's native language. However, employees come to us from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. We cannot assume that just because we translate a document into their native language that they are able to read and comprehend written material. So, it is important to review the handbook with the employee in detail and *read* crucial information to them – for example, the animal abuse policy or contract that they sign upon employment.

The internet offers many resources for the employee handbook. In any case, it is best to have your lawyer review the draft document prior to implementation in order to make sure all the legal bases are covered.

2. Job descriptions: Job descriptions are another key to providing clarity for employees. Many positions on the farm involve a variety of responsibilities, and it is easy to have things slip through the cracks when an employee does not realize that a particular task is part of their job. Job descriptions are also useful during the hiring process to let employees know "up front" what the job requires.

Pennsylvania State University Extension has a great online tool, specific to dairies – the [Job Description Generator](#). It contains templates for a variety of dairy job classifications that can be customized to fit your farm. The Penn State tool generates job descriptions in English, so Spanish translation may be necessary. For the translation, it is best to work with a real person, not an automated online translator. The investment is worth it.

3. Protocols/SOPs: Once an employee knows what the job responsibilities are, the next question is, "How do I do them?" The answers come from the protocols or standard operating procedures (SOPs) for specific tasks. Protocols should be:

- As simple as possible – written in plain language with as little unnecessary jargon as possible;
- Written in the predominant native language of the employees;
- Readily accessible to employees and/or posted in a prominent place.

Consistency is key on the dairy. Having usable protocols that every shift follows helps immensely in achieving more consistent results. "Usable" means accessible, current, simple, clear, and understandable – a living document. "Usable" does not mean written only in English, hidden in a binder in the main office. "Usable" does not mean written five years ago and sitting in a dusty, manure-covered binder in the barn.

Implementing the protocols often requires providing some hands-on training to ensure the employee develops good habits and learns things the "right" way the first time around. Your veterinarian, nutritionist, and allied industry consultants can help you develop protocols that fit your farm's needs.

If you put the time, effort, and thought into these three documents and use them in day-to-day operations of the farm, then employee confusion and perceptions of unfairness will decrease immensely. Such challenges will never disappear entirely, because we're working with human beings! However, spelling out terms of employment, pay raises, and workplace policies will help create a clear map of the road ahead for employees. It will help them know how to succeed at their jobs. It will help foster a healthy working environment where employees feel like they are valued and treated fairly. This in turn will increase the farm's day-to-day performance and reduce employee turnover, both of which will help your bottom line.

Resources

Employee Handbook:

- <http://agebb.missouri.edu/commag/swine/hdbook.pdf> -- includes some language about swine but is a great template for dairy employee handbooks, too
- <http://www.extension.umn.edu/agriculture/dairy/employees/schwartauemployee-handbook-development-guide.pdf>
- <http://nature.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/17.pdf> —includes a detailed employee handbook outline
- <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/dairyteam/sites/www.extension.iastate.edu/files/dairyteam/Dairy%20Newsletter%20-%20Employee%20Mgt%203%20-%20Handbook%20Need.pdf>

Job Description Generator: <http://www.agh.com:8180/PSUJobDescription/>

Protocols:

- http://www.hoards.com/E_animalhealth/aabp6
- <http://dairy.missouri.edu/herdmgt/> —includes links to common generic protocols that must be adapted for your own farm



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