

Last year, an activist video showing deplorable animal treatment emerged from one of the largest dairies in Canada. One comment in an article about the incident struck a chord with me. An “industry veteran” interviewed for the story commented that a *“culture of neglect”* had developed on this dairy, which allowed the unwarranted and unwanted behavior to happen.

We all know that the employees shown in the Canadian video and other activist videos did not get up that

morning and decide, “I am going to go torture some cows today.” Likewise, we know that the owners or managers did not tell their employees to go harm animals.

Rather, in such cases, there was a failure on the part of farm management to declare acceptable animal care and handling standards and protocols and to provide

training and equipment to employees, allowing them to do the job properly.

In the absence of these specific essentials for proper animal husbandry, employees were left to devise their own methods to handle cattle and deal with unusual or difficult situations such as cows down in the freestalls or milking parlor. Their solutions were often ugly and sickening. Yet these employees had a job to do and

## Creating a winning culture on your dairy



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they got it done the best they could. Unfortunately, the way they got it done reflected the culture of neglect of farm management.

Activist videos depict extreme negative examples. But some type of culture is at work on every farm. Your farm has a certain culture and this culture affects every level of your business.

### **Is culture on your radar?**

There are times when I am asked to conduct employee training on a dairy (feeding, milking, maternity, etc.) and I faithfully deliver the information to the employees. However, while I'm conducting the training, I often realize that ultimately my training will not be very helpful because the dairy's culture is rife with dysfunction or neglect. Such a dairy is typically plagued by high employee turnover, poor employee performance, and rampant workplace conflicts, all of which take away from the dairy's financial success and make it a less than optimal place to work.

Are there dairies that are financially successful in spite of not paying attention to culture? Sure. But then I ask the question, "How much more successful would they be if they had an optimal dairy culture?"

In my work as Dairy Technical Trainer at Diamond V, I see a wide range of approaches to dairy culture, ranging from culture as a deliberate part of business strategy to "culture not on the radar at all." From the bottom up, the difference is very noticeable.

Whether you consciously consider it or not, your dairy has a culture. Does your dairy have a culture of excellence or a culture of neglect?

### **It all starts at the top**

A dairy's culture is established from the top down. Here are some questions to consider:

- Do you have a stated mission statement for the dairy?
- What are the core values that your organization lives by (e.g. respect, honesty, hard work, accountability, trust, humane treatment of animals, teamwork, etc.)?
- Are the core values and mission statement written down (in all necessary languages) and shared with employees?
- Are the mission statement and core values posted in a prominent place on the dairy (break room, main office, etc.) allowing employees to see them often?

### **Employee "onboarding" introduces culture**

How do you introduce a new employee to your dairy? If that person engages personally with your business, you and the employee are going to be more successful.

It's a classic win-win – the best type of employee-employer relationship.

Explain to the employee the “big picture” of what the dairy does for society, the community, the employees and their families, and the animals. Share the dairy’s mission statement and core values.

Writing a mission statement can occupy a whole article by itself, so we’re going to leave that for another time. But, if you do not have one, or have not pulled it out for a while, consider putting one together or updating what you already have.

Another onboarding idea would take little time to implement but could potentially yield big impact: Give the new employee a brief tour of the entire dairy and show them the different stages of the cow’s lactation cycle from freshening to dry off.

Contrast this approach with a more typical onboarding procedure of having the employee fill out paperwork and then start right away in the milking parlor: “Here, put on this apron and these gloves and find the guy in the red hat – he will show you what to do.”

Which process do you think is more likely to engage that employee personally with your dairy? Other questions to consider:

**Sample mission statement:** “John Doe Dairy provides high quality milk that feeds the world. We strive to provide a safe, healthy workplace for our employees with opportunities for advancement. We aspire to be good stewards of the environment and the animals in our care.”

- What is your system for training new employees, or employees cross training for other positions?
- Do you provide employees with a job description and training for the job you need them to perform?
- Do you have an employee handbook that explains terms of employment, code of conduct, core values, and other essential information about the dairy?

### **Ongoing employee development and retention**

With increasing pressure on immigration to the U.S., it is becoming more and more challenging to recruit and retain good employees. However, if employees feel like they are valued and have opportunities to improve themselves, they are more likely to be content. Employees who are content in their jobs are more likely to stay.

Inevitably, there are employees who won’t work out on your dairy or who will choose to go elsewhere. Nonetheless, the culture of your dairy has a huge role in employee retention.

Give your employees clarity about your expectations by providing them with an employee handbook that includes your mission statement, core values, and general expectations, as well as all the other human resource details that are essential.

Work with your management team, veterinarian, nutritionist, and allied industry resources to produce written procedures for every process on the farm so that employees don't miss details. Conduct training sessions in each department (milking, maternity, feeding, breeding, etc.) on a regular basis to refresh concepts that underlie the standard operating procedures you have in place. Conduct regular meetings at the department level at least, even if they are only brief 5-10 minute "check-ins" before a shift.

Frequent check-ins allow feedback from employees, which can nip many problems in the bud before they get big. It also reinforces the employee-employer relationship and helps to keep employees personally engaged.

Employee performance reviews are another great opportunity to keep employees personally engaged with your business and help them improve themselves.

Provide employees with an opportunity to receive constructive feedback and improve their skills on the dairy. Offer opportunities for cross training in other departments, so when you have a key person that is absent from work, you can move an employee into place to fill that gap. Engage employees one-on-one to identify individuals that have the personality and drive to take on leadership roles.

There are always going to be employees who are not interested in advancement or change, and that is okay, because you need those people too. The employee review is still valuable for these employees, as it allows you to help them to be the best they can be at whatever level of responsibility they choose. Even if they choose not to take on an opportunity, just knowing the opportunity exists goes a long way toward keeping them engaged.

Building and maintaining a healthy and productive culture on your dairy takes a tremendous amount of work and dedication. It is not easy, but the rewards are great. Some dairies develop and maintain a great culture and I am in awe at what they are able to accomplish.

## Resources

### **Mission Statements:**

- [http://www.hoards.com/blog\\_dairy-purpose](http://www.hoards.com/blog_dairy-purpose)
- <http://www.anisci.umn.edu/prod/groups/cfans/@pub/@cfans/@ansi/documents/asset/anisci-dairydiag-wkshts-05.pdf>
- [http://www.progressivedairy.com/pd/features/2008/0408/0408\\_ehmke.html](http://www.progressivedairy.com/pd/features/2008/0408/0408_ehmke.html)

**Job Descriptions:** The Penn State Job Description Generator is now back online. This website provides a step-by-step process, with generalized protocols for tasks on the dairy. Fill in a few fields with information, click a few boxes, and the website generates a MS Word document that you can edit and further customize for the needs of your dairy. Information entered into the form is completely anonymous and the website does not collect or store any information. See <http://www.agh.com:8180/PSUJobDescription/>

**Protocols /Standard Operating Procedures:**

- <http://dairy.missouri.edu/herdmgt/>
- <http://www.hoards.com/DE/protocols>
- <http://extension.psu.edu/animals/dairy/hr/tools-for-dairy-employee-supervisors/ud011>

**Definition of culture:**

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>



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