

Dairy Worker Training Experiences

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Abstract

In recent years, the dairy industry workforce has changed considerably, creating challenges to effective communication, oversight and direction of worker effort. Effective training interventions are necessary to assure that dairy workers have the skills and knowledge to make sound animal health and production related decisions. One approach to this challenge is to formalize a dairy worker training curriculum and offer culturally sensitive training opportunities for Hispanic dairy workers. Training opportunities range from individualized training programs designed to address health and production issues specific to a particular dairy, to centralized training sessions designed to provide basic and general knowledge and skills to employees of multiple dairies. Training methodologies should engage this cultural population into the learning process and address producers' needs regarding topic coverage and preferred delivery methods. Such programs can be popular and successful, based on producer and worker course evaluations.

Résumé

Ces dernières années, la main-d'œuvre travaillant dans les fermes laitières a changé considérablement, ce qui a compliqué la communication avec les employés, et la supervision et la direction de ceux-ci. Il devient nécessaire d'intervenir en donnant de la formation aux employés pour s'assurer qu'ils aient les compétences et la connaissance leur permettant de prendre de bonnes décisions concernant la santé des animaux et la production de lait. Une des approches que l'on peut suivre pour relever ce défi est d'élaborer un programme de formation spécifique à la production laitière et d'orienter ce programme pour qu'il tienne compte de la culture des employés, dont un bon nombre sont notamment hispanophones. La formation peut se donner de façon individuelle dans une ferme laitière en particulier, en traitant des questions de santé animale et de production qui y sont reliés, ou de façon plus centralisée à des employés de plusieurs fermes, en visant l'acquisition de connaissances et de compétences générales de base. Il faut choisir une méthodologie qui éveille l'intérêt de cette population culturelle pour cet apprentissage et qui réponde aux besoins des producteurs en ce qui a trait

aux sujets couverts et à la manière de les enseigner. De tels programmes de cours peuvent devenir populaires et fructueux, surtout s'ils prennent en compte l'évaluation qu'en font les producteurs et les employés.

Introduction

Hispanics represent a significant portion of the agricultural workforce in the United States. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of Hispanic farm workers has nearly doubled from 183,000 to 364,000.⁵ These farm workers may or may not have prior livestock experience, but constituted 47.4% of farm labor in 2002.⁵ Because only a very small number of farm managers are Hispanic,⁵ and Hispanic farm workers are for the most part foreign-born and Spanish-speaking,⁶ a communication gap is likely to arise between English-speaking management and Spanish-speaking labor on livestock operations.

The problem of communication is exacerbated on large operations where owners do not directly supervise the treatment that each cow receives on a daily basis. Instead of knowing and managing each and every cow, the dairy owner typically has a manager, who in turn has area supervisors, who have area workers. It is the area workers who have the opportunity to observe each cow on a daily basis and many times need to make decisions regarding the treatment that the cows receive. The owner must now rely on the decision making skills of his or her employees. How does the dairy producer assure that his or her employees are well prepared to make decisions that may have a profound effect on animal health and productivity?

Effective training programs that provide dairy workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to make health and production related decisions are absolutely critical. Although dairy producers see worker training as a priority,^{1,2} they admit that they lack time and ability to effectively train their workers on the farm.³

While herd veterinarians are ideally situated to train dairy workers because of their production medicine knowledge and because of their awareness of health and production issues on their client dairies, they might lack an understanding of adult educational theory and methodologies that are more likely to engage learners and foster a higher level of motivation among dairy workers. This review focuses on factors that are key to

enhancing motivation and engagement on the part of dairy workers, and summarizes the development of a Hispanic dairy worker training curriculum that has proven popular for Colorado's dairy industry.

Why is "Why" Important?

Regardless of the population of learners attending a training intervention, the instructor must deliberate carefully about what information he or she will be sharing with students. Is the instructor merely listing the steps of the milking routine, or is he or she explaining why forestripping is important and why the pre-dip solution needs to be in contact with the teat skin for at least 30 seconds? The key word here is *why*.

Adult learners need to understand *why* things need to be done in a certain way if they are to truly understand the importance of their work. Moreover, for adult learners to be truly engaged in the learning process, they need to see the value of what is being learned. When perceiving the material they are learning as something of value, the learning becomes relevant and adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn.⁷

Training programs that aim to motivate students and engage them in the learning process should share with students the *whys* in the milking parlor, in the sick pen, in the maternity area, in the calf rearing area and so forth. When the number of animals on an operation is in the thousands, then the owner or manager will not be able to make every single decision regarding treatment of sick animals or when to intervene with a difficult calving. When livestock workers understand the reasons behind the protocols in place and the basis for choosing treatment A instead of treatment B, they are better equipped to exercise problem solving skills in the management of a difficult case. Whether it is an individualized training program or a centralized training session, the content of the intervention should focus on basic knowledge and the *why* of things in the area of the operation being discussed. Knowing *why* motivates students and helps them make decisions when needed.

Effective Training

Besides including the *why* of procedures and protocols, cultural issues that can hinder understanding need to be considered and addressed if training interventions are to be effective in engaging learners. Some cultural barriers that may affect communication on dairy farms and have been previously discussed⁴ include collectiveness, power distance, degree of expressiveness and the degree of context in communication.⁷ These cultural characteristics are generally very different for White US-born versus foreign-born, Spanish-speaking individuals. They influence the way words are under-

stood, the meaning of nonverbal cues, the willingness to disagree with someone considered an expert or a superior, and the environment most conducive to learning.⁴

How do these differences translate to a dairy worker training session?

Because Hispanics are from a high context culture with respect to communication, visual cues are extremely important when facilitating training. The instructor must make an effort to "read" the learners' body language. Hispanic students will tend to agree with everything said by the "expert" because disagreeing might be seen as disrespectful. Asking questions of the teacher might also be perceived as disrespectful behavior by some learners. The instructor should make it very clear to students that questions are welcome and invite students to share their experiences with the class.

In order to verify whether or not concepts are clear and the reasons for procedures are understood, the teacher should ask questions of the students in an informal manner during class. Especially when literacy skills are a concern, verbal quizzes are more successful than written questionnaires at revealing how well the students understand the concepts presented during the training. Practice time allows the teacher to assess the students' skills with specific work-related tasks, and case discussions are appropriate for testing students' decision making skills and recollection.

The distance between the trainer and the students can be reduced by stating common goals and promoting two-way communication. Using student-friendly vocabulary and sharing relevant experiences that illustrate the teacher's learning process are also useful in closing that perceived gap. For example, when facilitating a training session on calving management, the instructor could share with the class mistakes made while managing difficult calvings, and lessons learned from those mistakes.

Whenever possible, training interventions should be facilitated in the native language of students. Especially when second language skills are limited, students benefit from being presented with information in their native language. It is also very important for the instructor to be aware of regional differences regarding key vocabulary.

Regardless of the cultural background of the learners, training sessions aimed at motivating and engaging dairy workers should:

1. promote small group discussion
2. engage in interactive two-way communication
3. allow for feedback
4. be rich in visual aids and relevant examples
5. allow for practice time during a hands-on laboratory session

A Producer-driven Approach to Dairy Worker Training

When members of the Integrated Livestock Management (ILM) program decided to formalize its dairy worker training program in 2002, the main goal was to offer custom-made training sessions that addressed the specific needs and issues of individual dairy operations. The authors chose to market the program in such a way because of the obvious advantages of addressing specific issues of individual dairy farms and their workers. The program met with fair success, but only a selected group of dairy operations chose to contract the ILM dairy worker training services.

In the spring of 2005, a group of dairy producers, private industry and university representatives met to discuss ideas for additional dairy worker training. The program proposed by producers would offer training sessions on a variety of topics for key dairy employees at a centralized location on a regular basis. Instead of scheduling individual training sessions at the request of the dairy's owner or manager, dairy producers in many cases preferred to be informed of previously scheduled training sessions through phone calls and mail brochures.

Since June 2005, this producer-driven initiative, called the Dairy Management Program, has facilitated training sessions three to four times a year and has been very successful in reaching employees from many dairies in Colorado. Each class is attended by twenty to thirty students and is characterized by great interaction between students and facilitators. Because the program enjoys some monetary support from allied industries, cost to producers has been kept low. Low registration fees allow the producer to register more workers who may benefit from the learning opportunity. Topics covered during these centralized sessions include Supervision, Training and Safety, Feeding Management, Calving Management, Milking Parlor Management, Calf Rearing, Reproductive Management, Physical Exam and Sick Cow Identification. Because the majority of dairy workers in Colorado are Spanish-speaking Mexicans, the training programs are facilitated in Spanish and the recommendations previously discussed to enhance motivation and engage the students in the learning process are followed.

Facilitators include the author and other Colorado State University and out-of-state Spanish-speaking trainers. Students receive handouts with the content discussed during the training session, and additional resources when appropriate. Students and producers may visit the Integrated Livestock Management program website to view and download past presentations

and view the schedule for upcoming training sessions, and may also call or email the facilitators with questions and comments.

A planning committee consisting of producers, industry and university representatives determines topics to be discussed during training interventions, appropriate venues and dates for the sessions. Dairy producer input has been critical to the success of this program. Although coordinated by Colorado State University, the activities of the program are primarily a reflection of dairy worker training needs as expressed by producers and dairy workers themselves. These centralized training sessions have enabled the program to reach more dairy operations and to establish new working relationships with producers, who now request more training services in the form of individualized training interventions.

The planning committee and ILM continue to expand and refine course content and delivery of training sessions and advertise dairy worker training in more effective manners. An area for future development is the objective assessment of the impact of these training sessions on animal health and productivity at the farm level. There are many limitations to objectively measuring the impact of worker training interventions. Ideally, worker behavior, attitude and decision-making capabilities could be assessed, but high turnover rate of dairy farm labor, and the multitude of factors that can affect dairy health and production parameters make such assessments problematic. Meanwhile, subjective assessment of worker training has been very positive as an indication of its perceived value among the dairy producer and dairy worker communities.

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