

Employee Communication on the Farm

by Megan Weisenbeck, DVM, Northern Valley Dairy Production Medicine Center
www.dairymed.com | www.facebook.com/northernvalleydairy

When I graduated from veterinary school almost 5 years ago, communication in the workplace wasn't really on my radar. My mind was on what was wrong with the cow, how was I going to fix it, and if I was going to get lost on my way to Mr. Hershberger's in the back "mountains" of southeast Minnesota with no cell phone service and only a plat book. I'll admit, I didn't know how to use a plat book before my first vet job! Fast forward 4 years; I now work in an area where I don't need a plat book and my phone works at least 75% of the time. However, perhaps the largest difference I feel in my day-to-day work is the time I spend thinking about improving processes on a farm and the communication needed to do that. I find it very interesting to observe how employees are managed on farm and am becoming more involved in training Spanish-speaking employees as my Spanish improves. After some trial and error, I have some tips to improve communication on farm.

1. **Write it down!** Milking routine, cleaning, calf and cow feeding, vaccine protocols – document and place it in an area where workers can access it. We recently updated the procedure for our milk culture lab in the vet clinic and have it hung up next to work area. Inevitably, I would always forget to finish the spreadsheet for billing without the reminder. Furthermore, I find that I sometimes forget what specific instructions I provided 6 months again if I don't write and email/post it.
2. **Take the time!** Training persons in a procedure takes time and repetition. You might have protocols in place for how to treat a cow, but employees still ask you what to do for cows with pneumonia. Did you take the time to review the protocols and where they are located? We recently attempted to start on-farm milk culture on a farm and it was abandoned shortly after starting. Why? We spent a brief session training the herdsman and lead milker. After that, they were on their own. We didn't tell them why or read culture plates with them on a regular basis. We simply just didn't take the time.
3. **Tell them why.** People will do a better job when they understand why it is so important. I have been surprised at how often employees ask why. I recently had one calf feeder ask for a reading material about calf care so he could get better.
4. **Listen.** This summer, I participated in a farm meeting with employees. I was there to review calf health and expectations for colostrum collection and cleanliness. Of the 80 minutes I was there, we talked about calves for maybe 15 minutes. The rest of the time was spent listening to employees discuss current issues they were having with the parlor and pushing up cows. It had been a long time since they had a meeting and they wanted to take advantage of the time that they had with their employers listening.

5. **Retrain, retrain, retrain.** One time is not enough! Inevitably, new workers start, people drift from protocol, equipment on the farm changes. Retraining meetings also provide opportunities to hear about potential barriers and ideas for solutions. If you engage your employees, they will be more engaged with you.