

I can't fire myself

It's ironic that what I planned to write about this issue I misspelled in a headline that appeared on this same page last issue. Management is not easy to get right – on a dairy or in any business.

I offer some tips and some of the lessons learned using our own story about how we added an extra e and n to the spelling of what should have been a simple word.

I usually write this column near the end of the time frame when the magazine is produced. This by itself is risky. It means there are fewer opportunities for my own and others' eyes to catch any errors made. I do this to make sure this page is the most current and up-to-date of any in the magazine. That's the risk-reward trade-off.

10 percent of the time

My first point when it comes to management: Understand the risks and trade-offs of your management decisions. You might be able to get cows through a parlor by shortening your udder prep procedure and requiring employees to just "speed up, and be extra careful." But it's inherently more risky to milk quality to do so when relying on a longer, more thorough procedure is the more reliable way to get better results. Start with yourself when analyzing your dairy's problems. Ask yourself: "How did I (or didn't I) contribute to this situation? What, if anything, could I change?" You may be blind to the real problem, which could be

you, but asking the question shows you're open to a thorough review and will likely prompt employees to be more forthright with their own evaluations. They will likely provide the insight you need to improve your management – but only after you ask the question yourself.

35 percent of the time

This leads to my second point: Before you blame employees, ask if your procedures are clearly defined and simple to understand. Better yet, quiz employees to see how well they understand all the procedures involved in your operation. If they can't repeat back all the procedures, and with as much detail as you'd like, first consider whether they are simple enough for your average employee to recall, not just your best one.

In the case of my spelling error, sound procedures were ignored. Our copyeditor was on vacation and so only one pair of eyes, instead of the usual two, looked over my writing. The person who wrote the headline on the page – me – didn't spell-check when done, which is our rule for typing live text directly onto the magazine page. I knew both of these rules. They can't get much simpler. I'd been trained how to use the tools required to do the job. I just didn't follow them.

50 percent of the time

After protocol refinement, training is the next most important element to prevent management

headaches. It's one in which oftentimes there is need for improvement – either in the level of detail or the frequency of it. For example, if an employee backs a loader into a commodity shed, but he was never trained how to use the necessary equipment, poor training should be at fault, not the employee. We managers, myself included, assume a lot about employees. Before we jump to the last step of management, honestly ask yourself: "Could more or better training have prevented this situation?"

5 percent of problems

You'll know you've honestly answered all of the questions above if you arrive at this final step of management and don't enjoy it. If you conclude you have a problem employee, not flawed protocols or insufficient training, it likely won't be the first time the individual at the center of your problem has been warned or in trouble. These situations are the hardest part of management. When you get here, you'll know it's time to reprimand the employee or let him or her go. That won't be a fun conversation. And you'll have to walk back through all the steps mentioned previously to explain why you're laying the blame squarely on him or her.

We've started looking at each instance in which we've made an error to trace it back to one of these four categories. It's not a fun activity, and I've discovered the best



Walt Cooley

Editor

walt@progressivedairy.com

(208) 324-4860

www.progressivedairy.com

employees will try to take the fall for something bad that happened. They will say it's their fault. But usually, even they will admit a revised procedure or a special training meeting would likely help the person whom they're standing up for, or maybe even covering up for, to improve.

After this most recent spelling mistake, I've reprimanded myself and have suggested changes in each of the management areas listed here, except the last one. I obviously still have a job. Whew! **PD**

 **PROGRESSIVE
DAIRYMAN**

Reprinted from July 1, 2013