

Labor Matters

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Experts cover today's key dairy labor issues and offer fool-proof techniques to optimize employee performance, satisfaction and longevity.

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5 Tips to Maximize Labor Productivity

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It doesn't matter if it's a milker or a herdsman -- hiring the right person for the job is critical to the success of your operation, and it should be taken very seriously.



By Felix Soriano, MS, PAS, APN Consulting, LLC

Employees play a key role in the success and profitability of your dairy. This is why I spend so much time giving advice on how to improve labor productivity at many dairies I work with.

Before I share some tips on how to improve employee's productivity, it is important to understand what productivity means.

Dr. Gregory Billikopf, from the Univ. of California, defines productivity as simply:
PRODUCTIVITY = ABILITY + MOTIVATION.

So, how do we improve labor productivity according to this simple equation? Let's look at each one of these two components individually:

Ability - This is what an employee can do. Quite frankly, once you hire a person to do a specific job, there isn't much you can do about his/her ability to do that job (or lack of ability). You may train and develop their skills, but if they lack the specific abilities required to do a particular job, then it may be better to just find them another job in the dairy that doesn't require those abilities.

A good example of this is hiring someone without the right physical abilities to milk cows. If high cow throughput is a big goal for the dairy, and employees are required to spend long hours in the parlor maintaining a consistent and high milking pace, then a short, stocky and unfit person most likely won't get the job done to the manager's expectations. This person won't be able to reach the front teats of the cows, will be tired before the end of the shift, and will slow down other people in the parlor. Whose fault is this? The employee trying to find a job? Or the manager for hiring the wrong person for that job?

This is why it's so important to take more seriously the selection process when hiring new employees. It doesn't matter if you are hiring a milker or a herdsman, hiring the right person for the job is critical to the success of your operation, and it should be taken very seriously.

So, to ensure good productivity, the first thing you need to do as a manager is to hire the right people for the right job. Make sure they have the abilities that are required for that particular job. For this, having a written job

description can be very beneficial.

Motivation - Keeping employees motivated is the key driver of labor productivity. I have written extensively about this topic (for more information go to my website, www.apndairy.com).

Here are 5 tips on how to keep employees motivated (i.e., productive) :

- 1. Eliminate any frustrations or roadblocks.** Pay special attention to the needs of your best workers/high performers. Oftentimes, excellent workers become mediocre because of frustrations that their managers were not able to resolve for them. Examples of these are:
 - When they don't get all the necessary tools to perform their job on time and as expected.
 - When poor performance is tolerated and high achievers, like them, feel taken advantage of.
 - When high performers are underutilized.
 - When they are not rewarded or compensated according to their performance.
- 2. Define clear goals and expectations.** In order to make your workers accountable, the first step is to spell out expectations up front and in clear terms. How will their performance be evaluated? What is expected from them? And what are the goals they need to achieve? For example, what is the loading accuracy expected for each batch of TMR feed the feeder prepares every day? Is there a goal for shrink losses of each ingredient in the commodity shed? Remember, part of your goal as a manager is to ensure that every worker knows exactly what is expected from them.
- 3. Monitor and document performance, and give them feedback.** Keeping track of each worker's performance will help them achieve your expectations and goals. For example, check parlor performance numbers like milk flow in the first minute, cows per hour, somatic cell counts (SCC). Share this information with each milking shift and let them know how they are doing, what do they need to improve, how they can achieve those goals.
- 4. Define the rules of the game.** Every dairy operation should have an employee handbook with a short but clear list of rules and policies. It is also important to clearly define the consequences of not abiding to those rules. A good example of this is cow handling techniques and what you, as a manager, expect from your employees when it comes to care of the animals and proper stockmanship. I spend a lot of time working with employees on this and helping them better understand cow behavior and proper cow handling.
- 5. Correct failure and reward success.** Do you have anyone in your team not performing to your expectations? If so, what are you doing about it? Sometimes, part of the reason why some people underperform is because this person was not properly trained, or the manager didn't take enough time to coach this person, or because the employee never received the necessary tools to succeed.

Other times, you may have to have a conversation with the person who's underperforming and discuss the seriousness of the case. Re-train the employee and establish a plan with a deadline of how things must improve, after which a decision will have to be made whether that person should stay with the dairy or not.

On the other hand, whether it's through bonus programs, or special perks, or schedule preferences, or all of the above, make sure that high performers are properly rewarded and compensated for their hard work.

These tips will help you keep your employees motivated, which consequently will help you improve labor productivity.

Felix Soriano, president and founder of APN Consulting, has more than 10 years of experience working with dairy producers and developing tools and programs to improve dairy performance and profitability. He has a Master of Science degree from Virginia Tech and received an Agricultural Labor Management Certificate from the University of California. Born and raised in Argentina, Soriano can relate and communicate very well with Hispanic employees to help bridge the communication and cultural gap between workers and managers. While working as a manager for a feed additive company, Soriano developed his leadership and supervisory skills. Now based in Pennsylvania, Soriano can be reached at 215-738-9130 or apnconsulting@verizon.net or felix@apndairy.com. Visit his website at www.apndairy.com.

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