

Could one of your employees become a feeding manager?

by Felix Soriano

SPANISH-speaking employees play key roles at many dairy operations throughout the U.S. today, especially in the West. However, milking and cleaning are the typical tasks these workers are given, despite a constant need for quality employees in other critical areas such as feeding, breeding, calf care, fresh cow management, and so forth.

From my experience, communication barriers and lack of formal training are two main reasons why Hispanic employees are less likely to be responsible for feeding and bunk management. But I have also seen exceptions where managers have had excellent success with Hispanic workers handling this very important role. Generally speaking, this success is based upon matching employee talent with the correct job. Also, the managers who are able to do so are often good coaches and usually have a formal training program in place.

Abilities to look for . . .

When evaluating the potential of any employee to take over the feeding management role, these are some of the abilities and talents that managers should look for:

1. Positive attitude and proactive. Find someone who is always trying hard to do his or her best, someone who is constantly thinking of new ideas and processes to make the job more effective and efficient.

2. Responsible and on time every day. This is very important, since the feeder plays a key role in performance of the animals. Feeding cows at the same time every day and having a very consistent TMR are critical.

3. Open-minded and eager to learn more. This position will require constant training and skill development.

4. Organized and detail oriented. This person will have to monitor and manage feed inventory, keep feed intake records, and be consistent with the feeding process.

5. Self confident. The employee in this position must have decisiveness and make decisions on his or her own. For example, after testing forage moisture levels they will need to change the amount of forages fed accordingly. At the same time, this person has to be willing to ask questions when in doubt.

6. Literate in Spanish and/or English (preferably both). This position will require the abilities of writing, reading, and in some cases doing basic math calculations.

7. Analytical, yet practical. This person will have to evaluate herd performance, feed intake, and so

forth and based upon that information make the changes necessary to maintain or improve performance.

8. Likes to be challenged. There are always new concepts, ideas, and technologies that can be put into practice in the feeding area of the dairy industry.

9. Honest. Not afraid to admit when they make a mistake.

10. Have knowledge of or be willing to develop basic computer skills. In order for this person to become a proficient feeder, he or she will need basic computer skills in order to work with spreadsheets, computerized feeding software, and dairy data analysis software.

It is not realistic to think that an employee with all these attributes will be easily found. In fact, even though many of these qualities will be necessary, especially those associated with attitude and behavior, some can be taught or developed.

It is crucial that the person taking a feed manager role understand the importance and responsibilities he or she will have. This is why dairy managers should put extra emphasis on feeders' training.

Once you have identified the right candidate within your organization to cover a future opening for the feeding management position, make a list of the skills and abilities that this person will have to develop and/or improve in order to succeed. Having a job description will help establish these needs. Also, if you have this job description in Spanish it will help to communicate the job requirements to your employees.

Top skills required . . .

Once you have identified your candidate and the skills or abilities they require, clear and specific training objectives will have to be established. Some of these skills required are:

- Proper TMR mixing. Including factors that can affect the mixing process, sequencing of ingredients, mixing time, loading accuracy, and mixer maintenance.

- Proper forage evaluation. This should include quality evaluation through visual appraisal, pH and temperature measuring, and testing of forages for moisture content.

- Proper bunk management. Including bunk space evaluation and scoring techniques, calculating feed intake and refusals, evaluating TMR consistency, determining number of TMR push-ups, and so forth.



- Keep proper and accurate daily records. Examples include the amounts of ingredients added into the mixer, total TMR volume fed, number of animals fed, TMR refusals, and so forth.

- Proper procedures for adding water or other liquid ingredients to the TMR to reduce sorting by cows and increase dry matter intake if necessary.

- Proper mixer maintenance. Periodically checking the accuracy of mixer scales, TMR particle size consistency, and doing regular mixer maintenance and cleaning.

Once the employee becomes proficient in these areas, feeding managers can also be trained to develop the following skills which are especially important in very large dairy operations:

- Proper manure evaluation. This is an important tool that can help identify diet variations and keep cows healthy.

- Proper body condition scoring. This is another important tool to help fine tune diets.

It is crucial that the person taking a feed manager role understand the importance and responsibilities he or she will have. This person will, in fact, be responsible for more than 50 percent of the variable costs on the dairy! This is why dairy managers should put extra emphasis on feeders' training. Whether the training is provided by the manager, nutritionist, Extension agent, outside consultant, or a combina-

tion of them, the training program must match the employee's needs, style, and language.

Have a follow-up plan . . .

Having a good follow-up plan after training is very important to ensure the employee is applying information learned during training and that he or she follows procedures correctly. Remember, the feeding manager plays a key role in the success and profitability of the dairy. Training, development, and evaluation of this employee should be an ongoing process. This will also help keep the employee motivated and sharp.

Finally, much of the information the feeding manager will collect is also important to the nutritionist. A proficient feeding manager can provide information that will help the nutritionist make key decisions that can affect animal performance and dairy profitability. This is why it is a must that the feeding manager periodically communicate with the nutritionist.

In many instances, however, language and cultural barriers can be a problem. Overcome communication barriers by working with bilingual nutritionists, veterinarians, Extension agents, and/or outside consultants who can help on a regular basis.

To develop a strong rapport and line of communication, a nutritionist who understands the employee's culture is ideal.

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