



GROUP HOUSING ADDS CHALLENGES

Cornell University's Neil Anderson described group-housed calf systems as being closer to 'nature's way' of raising calves. While systems may be automated, the role of calf 'manager' becomes more important. Recruiting and training the right person is critical.

Several dairies I work with have changed calf raising systems recently. More or less automated, group-housed calf systems have, for the most part, improved overall calf health, growth rates and labor efficiency, while also reducing costs.

However, while many dairy managers claim labor efficiency significantly improves with this system, I still have not seen solid numbers to prove this in larger dairies where an employee is in charge. With these systems, the type of labor required must be better and closely defined.

Clearly, day-to-day management of calves changes, and the person in charge of feeding has become even more important. They now become calf managers, and their job description goes beyond mixing milk, cleaning and carrying bottles and buckets to the hutches.

They now must evaluate each calf individually within the group, look at computer reports to analyze milk intake deviations, monitor the system's cleanliness daily, and identify problems before serious problems develop.

In the group-housed calf systems, the manager is key to the success or failure. I've seen both in my travels.

That's why I think it is so important to define the type of abilities and skills necessary before recruiting someone for the important role of calf feeder/manager – either from

within your staff, or from outside.

10 abilities

1) Good animal sense/nurturing.

Sensitivity to animals and the environment are probably the most important ability this person must have. If seeking a calf manager from within your existing staff, look for people who are good around the cows. Look for those who can handle cows calmly and efficiently. Look for those that are the best at identifying health issues.

2) Consistent and on time every day. Following routines and doing things the same way, at the same time every day, are key drivers of any successful program on the dairy.

3) Organized, methodical, and detail-oriented. This person must organize maintenance, de-horning, weaning, vaccination, treatment and other schedules and protocols. They most closely monitor individual calves within groups, computer reports and more.

4) Ability to read and write (preferably in both English and Spanish). This person must keep treatment and calf care reports, and read protocols and labels.

5) Ability to follow directions. Once the person goes through the training and understands the "whys" of the different jobs and protocols, directions need to be followed to the "T" to reduce problems and ensure proper procedures are always followed.

6) Good communicator. Communication is important for the success of the program. As a manager, you can help establish communication processes (weekly meetings, daily, weekly and monthly reports) to improve the communication.

7) Patient and calm, but fast and efficient under stress. It can be frustrating when animals don't cooperate. The calf manager must stay calm at all times, getting the job done without mistreating animals.

8) Cleanliness. The most common problem I see during disease outbreaks is that proper cleaning protocols were not followed at all times. Before hiring, look at how the person presents himself/herself. If the person already working at your dairy, do they pay attention to cleanliness? This is absolutely crucial when it comes to calf care and feeding.

9) Ability to lift heavy bags and animals. Some physical abilities will be required. Don't hire someone that will constantly need help to lift 50-100 lb. bags or work with the animals.

10) Ability to measure ingredients and liquids and do basic math. The role requires mixing milk, measuring treatment doses, weighing calves or calculating growth rates.

Before hiring a manager for your new group-housed calf system, assess the type of abilities he or she will need to succeed.

As managers, it is very hard and sometimes impossible to change people's abilities. This is why the recruiting and hiring process are so important. The more prepared you are as a manager by understanding the job well, having a written job description and written protocols the better chances you will have of hiring the right candidate for the job. □

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