



DAIRY CATTLE REPRODUCTION COUNCIL

Employees hold the key to successful breeding programs

Today, the success of a dairy's reproductive program is often left in the hands of trusted employees. Their skills and dedication to the farm's breeding strategy will ultimately affect all the various entities of the dairy's operation. To ensure top performance when it comes to getting your cows pregnant, here are some tips on improving employee performance while maintaining high reproductive success.

Employee management on a dairy farm is challenging, admits Richard Stup, branch manager with AgChoice Farm Credit in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, who says the greatest challenge facing dairy producers is worker availability. To improve employment rates Stup suggests that you become "an employer of choice" within your community, so people will seek you out and want to work for you. You can do this by offering excellent compensation programs, great training and an enjoyable work atmosphere.

Once you've hired qualified staff, there are a multitude of ways that you can help them learn and grow into strong reproductive specialists. We have explored some areas where you can make great gains in employee training and performance.

- **Feedback.** Employees want to know how they are doing and feedback is the best way to help them improve any areas of concern. For average and better employees, most of the feedback should be positive and supportive. This will help reinforce the good behaviors that make employees successful, says Stup. For poor behavior, corrective measures, such as retraining or discussing the poor behavior, should be implemented immediately, but be careful how it's presented. Stup mentions that most managers provide only negative feedback, which can lead to destructive behavior and cause employees to look for another job.
- **Decision Making.** Research at Penn State University found that dairy employees feel committed to their farm work when they have opportunities to participate in decision-making. To make your employees feel like part of the team, ask for their help when you're making big decisions about breeding protocols or heat watch programs. Their input may help you see a different perspective while making them feel their opinion is valued.
- **Tell-Show-Do-Review.** Training is a critical part of maintaining quality employees. Since on-farm jobs require physical labor, hands-on training is essential. Use this four-step training method, which Stup refers to as "tell-show-do-review," to ensure employees understand exactly how to complete the new task:
 - **Tell** employees how a task should be completed
 - **Show** them how to do it
 - Let the listeners **do** the procedure while the teacher watches
 - **Review** the employees' performance by telling them what they did well and where they can make improvement



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In the first few days of work employees can be overwhelmed with new procedures. After a few weeks, follow up with the employees to discuss why each task is completed. Getting the “why?” aspect of training across will help them understand the role their job plays while keeping them motivated and their performance levels high.

- **SOPs.** Since the manager can't be everywhere at once, standard operating procedures (SOPs) spell out exactly how processes should be carried out. SOPs reduce variation in how procedures are done by different people. Although they are a great training aid, Stup notes that they are never a substitute for training. Post SOPs so they are easily found. Provide the document in both English and Spanish so that all staff can easily use and understand the SOPs.
- **Incentives.** Rewarding employees for their hard work may be a way to boost performance, but it shouldn't take the place of educating, warns Stup. So if you want employees to do a better job in your reproduction program, Stup suggests an incentive for improved pregnancy rates. First, make sure everyone understands how their job helps achieve higher pregnancy rates. Along with the incentive, provide continued training and feedback so rather than relying on the incentive alone to drive improvement, you also provide a teaching moment.
- **Refreshers.** Even when people have been completing the same job for a long time, they may need to be refreshed to avoid bad habits. Refresher breeding courses are a great example of how managers can help employees remember what's important to the breeding program.

Improving employee performance is an ongoing task. By providing proper training, helpful feedback and decision-making opportunities, employee performance and your reproductive program can both reach high levels. Your herd's reproductive program is dependent on employee knowledge; your commitment to making the employee program a success is more than worth the investment.