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Engaged workforce key to animal care, performance

Sept. Summit offered hands-on and management skills

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

REINHOLDS, Pa. -- How cows perform in the parlor stems from attention to the big picture and the small details of care at calving and in the milking parlor.

How employees translate the protocols and routines of the dairy to daily practice can make the difference in the health and productivity of the dairy herd and the family farm business.

During the September Summit at Scattered Acres here in Reinholds, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, dairy producers had opportunities to participate in various dairy farm management and leadership sessions and to bring employees for participation in workforce training on everything from hands-on obstetrics and evaluation of down cows as well as BQA Certification training that focused on drug residue avoidance and avoiding beef quality defects by managing dairy cows for their optimum value at the end of their productive life.

Bringing together the threads of the day was a session led by Richard Stup of Stup Consulting and Ag Workforce Development on strategies for getting employees to do the right thing.

"The most important job you have as supervisors is to provide clarity and feedback," said Stup.

To foster good workforce morale, it's important to "weed out the non-doers. It's amazing how one bad apple can ruin the bunch," he said, explaining that it is easy to overlook things that other employees cover for (like habitual tardiness), but left go, this drags down the performance of the entire team over time.

"Cut your losses before it creates a culture that leads to higher turnover," he said.

Producers attending this session talked about how they handle their interactions with employees by steering them on what is good for the cows as their ultimate focus.

Stup noted that it's important for employees to have ownership of their responsibilities and some flexibility to contribute to the process.

"People want to do the right thing," he said. "We want to nudge them, teach them why things are done the way they are done and show them some of the big picture of what their roles accomplish. Give them the sense of helping to figure it out."

While it's important for protocols to be clear and to stress the importance of following standard operating procedures (SOPs), it's also essential, on dairies today, for employees to be thinking, not just following rules.

Standard operating procedures give personnel the processes to cover 95% of cases in their work on the dairy farm, but the reality is that 5% of what employees encounter require understanding of that big picture to have the capability to think about how to handle what doesn't fit the



(Above) The PDMP September Summit was held at the Hartman family's Scattered Acres Reinholds location.

(Below) Dr. Michaela Kristula and Dr. Billy Smith from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine conducted workshops for hands-on obstetrics and how to evaluate down cows. Photos by Sherry Bunting



(Above) Dr. Ernest Hovingh, Penn State Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences conducted the chute side training enabling producers to learn components of Beef Quality Assurance as both milk and beef producers for certification. (Below) An informal discussion with Rich Stup on workforce strategies and getting people to "do the right thing."



confines of SOPs.

Training and clear SOPs are both needed, and feedback.

"Feedback is very important and it's what we see missing in many businesses," said Stup. "Employees need feedback. That's the number one job of a supervisor, even more important than the SOPs and training."

He likened feedback to the third side of the triangle that makes the picture work.

"You are their eyes. You know what they are doing well and not doing well," Stup said.

From feedback comes the foundation for getting employee participation with an interest in continuous improvement.

"Participation is the strongest predictor of success," said Stup. "If employees know they have input and feel their opinion matters, their commitment to the farm grows. That's when the lights are on and you have an engaged workforce."

Continuous improvement was a theme throughout the other workshops during the September Summit. Whether it's honing skills for observing the birth stages and knowing when to intervene and what to do, or how to evaluate down cows to take appropriate action or how to do low stress cow handling, engaged employees understand the mission. They get the focus on what's good for the cows and have the tools and understanding to follow through on the commitment to do the right thing.

For more information about PDMP and upcoming programs, including the Pennsylvania Dairy Summit February 21-22 in State College, or to become a member of Pennsylvania's producer led organization, visit www.pdmp.org