Role of the Consultant in Labor Training & Education to Implement Feeding & Management Practices on Dairy Farms

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Introduction

Nutritionists are dependent upon the people who mix and deliver the rations to the cattle for the success of their nutrition program. It follows then, that we should be involved in the training and education of the feeders and managers responsible for carrying out these duties. Training refers to learning a specific protocol. Education involves understanding the reasons for following these protocols. Feeding cows can become boring and routine, but I’ve found that if we involve the feeders and herd managers in our discussions and consultations, they seem to enjoy their job more, do a more consistent job and help identify problems. Some have referred to it as “protocol degradation”, but employees will have fewer tendencies to take shortcuts with mixing and feeding procedures if they understand why we establish certain protocols and the effects of not following the protocols. As dairy farms become larger and rely on more hired labor, proper training, education and communication become essential. The nutrition consultant can assist dairy producers with achieving their goals for an efficient operation by becoming a part of the labor training and education process. The main goals should be to establish procedures and insure consistency no matter who is carrying out the established procedures. The larger the dairy and the more employees there are, the more important are proper training and consistency for a well managed operation.

How Do We Train and Educate Employees?

Consultants should assist in training employees on proper feeding and feed management techniques. This is essential if we want to get the most out of the rations we formulate. But we should also inform employees about the objectives of the feeding program, so they know where their duties fit into the overall process. We can help optimize employee skills and their value to the dairy. This can also increase the employees’ personal fulfillment and enjoyment of their job.

I have some clients that require the feeding personnel to attend our meetings when we discuss rations and items related to nutrition and health. We discuss mixing procedures, bunk management, and ration delivery. We may discuss these same items several times a year. One thing I’ve learned is not to take anything for granted. Things that may seem obvious to those of us who are continuously involved in nutrition may not be to others. We also ask for their input on problems that they are seeing and suggestions that they have for improvements. Solutions to potential problems come easier if we approach subjects in a positive way, rather than giving the impression that we are trying to find out who is making mistakes. We encourage questions on nutrition related topics. One on one discussions with feeders are very effective. Some employees tend to open up more on an individual basis. They may ask questions that they would not have with their boss present.

Some dairy producers may not initiate any contact between the feeding personnel and the nutritionist. It is on these dairies that it is the responsibility of the nutritionist to start the communication with the feeders, either by suggesting training and educational sessions to the management or by individual contact with the feeders as they perform their duties. A Power Point presentation showing correct mixing and feeding procedures is an excellent training tool for new
employees as well as a good continuing training and education program for existing employees. On one large dairy, the dairy manager, herd veterinarian and I use a Power Point presentation that we developed together for that dairy as a training tool for new employees. It can be easily modified and updated as needed.

As a nutritionist, have you ever attempted to make a change or improvement in a feeding program that required additional work or precision and had the dairy owner or manager say, “I can’t get my employees to do that. They can’t handle that task. They’re not smart enough or ambitious enough to do that.” This is not an employee problem. This is a management problem. Either the management did not train the employees adequately or they hired people that don’t fit the objectives of the dairy.

An example of consistency achieved through proper training is at Norco Farms in upstate New York (Glick, 2001). With a rolling herd average near 35,000 pounds, expanding to 800 cows requires a team that is trained as a “clone” of the management’s objectives and decision-making style. Clear objectives are spelled out and employees are trained to be comfortable enough with their duties to be able to make decisions consistent with the philosophy of the management. This is the only way that a dairy can expand without giving up some of the management advantages of a smaller operation.

Mexican dairy labor is becoming very widespread across the United States. Language barriers present special challenges. Feeding instructions, and feed mixing sheets should be written in Spanish. As pointed out by Schauer (2001), cultural differences are probably more of a problem to overcome with Mexican dairy labor than language barriers. Cultural barriers often lead to errors in communication. A bilingual employee who also understands the cultural differences should participate in the instruction and education if possible.

Carl Theunis of Tinedale Farms in Kaukauna, Wisconsin (Theunis, 1995) pointed out that the most important job aspects considered by employees include:

1. Being treated with respect
2. Interesting work
3. Recognition for good work
4. A chance to develop skills
5. Working with people who listen to their ideas for improvements
6. A chance to think for themselves rather than just carry out instructions
7. Seeing the end results of their work
8. Working with efficient managers
9. A job that is not too easy
10. Being well informed about what is going on.

These attributes came before good pay, benefits and job security. Consultants can’t control wages and benefits, but we certainly can have an influence on the items listed above.

If we properly educate the employees in charge of feeding and the managers in charge of the feeders, they know what to look for and can help us identify problems when we’re not there. I encourage them to call whenever they have a question, observation or problem. I’ve found that the more involved employees are in decision making, the more responsibility they feel and the better job they do. When I have a good rapport with the feeding personnel, we tend to solve problems rather than cover them up. An employee who feels they play a significant role in the overall operation will be more content with his/her position, thereby minimizing turnover.

If you have ever been to Disney World, you may have noticed that all of the employees, from the character actors to the street sweepers seem to really enjoy what they are doing and want to make sure you enjoy your experience at Disney. They all exhibit the image of Disney. This is no accident. The book, “The Disney Way” (Capodagli and Jackson, 1999), discusses Disney’s emphasis on training and continuing education for their employees and how the organization feels that it improves job performance and employee job satisfaction, thereby getting the full benefit out of the employee. Although the fantasy world of Disney is a far cry from the day-to-day operation of a dairy farm, the basic principles laid out by Walt Disney can be applied to all businesses, from large corporations to Midwest dairy farms.

Disney’s success with employees can be summed up this way: “Recruit the right people, train them, continually, communicate with them, ask their opinions, involve them, recognize them, and celebrate with them. If you show respect for their opinions and involvement, they will be proud of what they do and they’ll deliver quality service”.

The following are some of the nutrition basics that should be considered essential for feeding
personnel for implementation of a sound feeding program. Some deal with practical protocol while others involve understanding the objectives of the feeding program.

**Dry matter determination**

It is helpful to have at least two feeding employees proficient in determining ingredient dry matters with a Koster or microwave. This simple concept can be very misunderstood. Although it is relatively easy to dry a feed sample and memorize the calculations to determine the percent dry matter, I would like the employee to understand the concepts, rather than memorize a formula or procedure. They need to know that we balance a ration on a dry basis and how to adjust the amount of feed in the ration based on the dry matter percent. I have worked with some employees for a long time and realized that although they knew how to do dry matter calculations, they didn’t really know why we were doing it. If they understand the concepts, rather than just the cookbook calculations, they are better able to identify mistakes. The nutritionist should also help determine how often the employee should run dry matters on high moisture feeds (Bucholtz, 1999).

**Mixing procedures**

Employees should know what to look for in a properly mixed ration such as uniformity, particle length and moisture content and how mixing procedures affect these factors. Order of ingredient mixing, length of mixing time and accurate weighing procedures are subjects that should be reviewed frequently with feeding personnel. I’ve found that if the reasons for specific mixing procedures are not explained, shortcuts tend to creep into the routine, leading to inaccuracies. Feeders should look at what’s coming out of the mixer, not just what’s going in. A forage shaker box is a good tool to use with feeding personnel to illustrate the importance of proper mixing time.

**Bunk management**

Bunk management concepts are essential education for employees. Feed delivery procedures should be reviewed frequently. Again, the reasons for proper bunk management should be emphasized. The consequences of poor bunk management (moldy feed, reduced intake and production, sick cows) help the employee to understand the importance of proper procedures. Training on how to “read bunks” is important. The nutritionist should also help determine how to handle orts or refusals (Bucholtz, 1999). Do they leave them in the bunk, push them to the end of the bunk, discard them or refeed them to the same group or other groups such as heifers or dry cows. These are decisions that will need to be specific for each dairy’s situation.

**Recording feed intakes**

Bad feed intake data is worse than no information. If feeders are in charge of recording feed delivery and refusals, they need to be properly trained and provided the right equipment, such as accurate scales. Bucholtz, (1999) stated that feeders attending the Michigan State University Feeder Schools were often confused by how to do and record feed intake. He suggests that this is an area that feeders require regular training and support.

**Silo management**

Here is another area that seems simple, but has widespread influence on the health and production of the herd. The implications of moldy silage should be emphasized with employees and how to minimize it by proper silo face management and discarding questionable silage. If there is a problem with the silage, the person loading it is the first to see it. If they know what to look for, the dairyman and I get a “heads up” before it becomes a cow problem. Safety concerns related to excavating the face of bunker silos should also be addressed.

**Ingredient quality control**

The feeders are generally the employees that receive ingredients to be unloaded in the commodity barn. They should know what to look for as far as ingredient quality so they can point out questionable ingredients before they are fed (or unloaded if possible). The importance of ingredient rotation and cleaning out commodity bays before adding new feed should be emphasized.

**Cow observations**

Although they shouldn’t take the place of the owner, manager, nutritionist or veterinarian when it comes to identifying cow or herd problems related to feeding, the feeding personnel can be the first to observe potential problems and point them out.
They can help us look for “red flags”. Are the cows finicky at the bunk or separating the TMR? Are they leaving more feed than normal or are the feed bunks emptied quickly? These are items directly related to their job.

**General nutrition topics**

Sometimes it’s fun to just cover some general nutrition topics or new concepts with the employees. It may not have a direct affect on their job, but if an employee has the interest, it may help to keep their job fun. Sometimes employees will ask me about articles they have read in dairy magazines. It indicates that they think of their job as more than putting in their time. They have a genuine interest in the importance of their duties to the goals of the dairy. It also makes my job more rewarding.

I believe a certain level of nutrition education is important for employees involved in feeding. Consistent procedures are important when it comes to feeding. An understanding of some of the basic concepts of nutrition helps those involved in feeding to do a better job. It can help them understand the importance of their duties. Training and education should be a continuous project, not just a crash course when employees are hired. Continuing education also reminds employees of the importance of their role in the overall workings of the dairy. The consultant can be an integral part of this process.

**References**


