

Look Who's Talking When Setting Goals & Protocols for Calf Care

Effective communication is essential in any organization for getting tasks accomplished correctly. According to a survey by the National Milk Producers Federation (2009) on average there are 5.6 workers on dairy farms in the US. The number of larger dairy operations with many employees has been growing, with management evolving from an owner-operator model (owners involved with all aspects of the operation) to a model where specialties within the operation have dedicated management and personnel. Important outcomes of these changes are that critical management decisions are being made by middle management and workers, and the communication between owners and workers has become indirect and mediated by middle management. This creates more opportunity for miscommunication and potential failure to achieve established goals in the dairy. One important area of concern is where the responsibility for prudent drug use lies in this new system.

We used on-farm surveys to describe the agreement of responses to questions about calf health events among workers, owners and veterinarians on large (greater than 500 milking cows) and small farms (less than 163 milking cows). More than 224 people were interviewed including farm owners, veterinarians, herdsman, herd managers, and calf managers, feeders and treaters. Interviews were conducted either in English or Spanish and were done at 53 farms from 5 states (NY, WA, OR, ID and AZ). We found that labor structure varied by calf-herd size and that language abilities and preferences were not uniform across different job categories. This stresses the need for bilingual middle management on large dairy farms. When setting calf health goals, owners and veterinarians believed that most communication occurred between them. However, more than half of the calf treaters interviewed thought that communication about setting health goals took place between themselves and the calf manager. The perception of "who's talking with who" was more uniform across different job categories for communication about daily tasks for animal health.

One interesting finding was that there was no agreement with regard to knowledge of written protocols, indicating that even if they were available not everyone interviewed was aware of the protocols. These results show the complexity and challenges of communication on dairies with layers of employees having different primary language preferences. Overcoming these issues and reaching shared goals in this or any team-based environment require effective communication, clear designation of responsibilities, and methods to obtain feedback on successes and failures. Additional studies are now focusing on identifying solutions to overcome the issues pinpointed in this study. We would be glad to get your view on these problems and your opinion on how to overcome them. For contact e-mail us at rvp25@cornell.edu.