Hiring and Managing Spanish-Speaking Employees

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Recommended Citation
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra/132
The trend of consolidating small dairy farms into larger operations means that more large dairy producers are spending more time dealing with workers and less time managing cows.

Local workers are hard to come by, tending to seek “city” jobs in population centers. That means that hiring migrant labor may be critical for the sustainability of dairy operations. Communication with these new workers is an issue.

It’s a different work force out there

Between 1990 and 2000 the Hispanic population in the U.S. has more than doubled (Figs 1, 2). Nebraska and Minnesota ranked among the top 10 states in Hispanic population growth between 1990 and 2002 (Fig 3).

It should not come as a surprise that there is increased availability of Hispanic workers in the Dakotas. In the last 5 years alone, the Hispanic population in North Dakota and South Dakota increased by almost 40 and 50%, respectively (Migration Policy Institute 2006). Mexican nationals are by far the predominant group with 59% of the total (US Census Bureau), citizens of El Salvador are the second largest group, and South Americans account for only 4% of the total.

Knowing the nationality of your labor force is of utmost importance. We tend to think of Hispanics as just one group where in reality the only thing they have in common is that they speak Spanish!

Knowing the different nationalities has to be taken into consideration when putting together work shifts, promoting individuals to higher-responsibility positions within the dairy, and any other planned activities.

Hiring and working with Hispanic employees

When hiring and working with Hispanic employees, one of the first things to be aware of is their origin. Spanish-speaking employees are proud of their heritage and would rather be called by their nationality than be labeled as “Hispanics.” In fact the term Hispanic has the connotation of originating from Spain, and although many of your employees may have cultural ties (language, religion, etc.) with that country, they still have
local traditions, festivities, etc. So don’t be afraid to ask where they are originally from. Maybe even have a map handy so they can point “home” out to you. If you are interested in them and their heritage, this will work wonders in helping break the communication barrier.

When hiring make sure you hire the right person for the job. Always have a written bilingual job description. You want to be very clear and concise about what you expect. Several pages of duties and responsibilities might only confuse a prospective good employee.

Don’t hire or keep people who don’t fit. You will seldom hear about the complaints your employees may have about a newly hired employee, but it will show in overall performance. If there are problems, you need to step up and solve them right away. Don’t believe that things will take care of themselves by themselves; they might, but not in the way you were expecting to!

You may need the help of an interpreter or a mediator to help sort things. Always remember that family ties are very strong among Hispanics so before hiring an outsider, ask your current employees if there’s someone in the family that they can recommend for that position.

This is a way of showing them your appreciation for the work they are performing and that you are also caring about other members of their family.

Once trained, will they stick around?
Some dairies put their employees to work year after year in the parlor, at best alternating between milking, pushing cows, or scraping alleys. Although not everyone on the farm is ready for the next challenge, there are some that without a doubt would embrace opportunities for advancement if given the chance. Grusenmeyer and Maloney looked at this in a 2004 survey of several dairies (Fig 4 and Table 1).

From their survey it is clear that, if given the chance, most employees would like to learn more about the chores they are currently performing.

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Although their results suggest that milking training sessions are still a high priority, this might be due to the high turnover rate usually experienced in dairies. Regrettably, the turnover in dairy farms is usually high. It was estimated that almost 44% of the employees stayed less than a year at a farm, whereas only 7% stayed more than 4 years (Grusenmeyer 2005). Of course, some of
this might be related to the fact that nearly a third of the employees in this survey had left their spouse at home.

Be prepared for turnover before you even hire. Unless the spouse and/or children are in the U.S. with them, at a certain point in time employees will ask for a vacation and will need to be replaced. This is usually a problem for dairies, because once an employee has been trained and has polished his skills, he begins to feel it is maybe time to head home to visit the family.

Who’s ready for the next challenge?
Those employees that have been at the farm for more than a year might be happy to accept the challenge of working in other areas of the dairy operation.

If you are going to promote an employee, first know how well he relates to and is respected by his co-workers. Because an employee is excellent at quietly performing the same task every day doesn’t necessary mean he is ready to supervise co-workers.

And not everyone will accept being corrected or commanded by a peer that has been promoted to a higher position. Can your new manager overcome that and report problems that arise as a result of faulty practices performed by his co-workers?

Choosing who to promote to a management position is thus a delicate maneuver. Once you have identified the right individual for the position, you must make clear to everyone that he is in charge and what his responsibilities are. Be sensitive to all feelings; the last thing you want is to break the working harmony of the workers.

Hold regular meetings
It is always useful to have at least one monthly meeting. Even if everything is going great and there’s nothing new to report you still want to hold a meeting, if just for a few minutes.

Do this during working hours. Don’t ask your employees to attend a meeting during their days off or during resting hours. When they attend, pay them their normal hourly wage. This will ensure that none will be in a hurry to leave early and that all issues will be thoroughly addressed. The same goes for any training sessions attended out of normal work hours; after all, training will only benefit the dairy!

Creating a meeting routine avoids the stress of an “urgent” meeting that’s called because of a recent problem. Even if the problem is urgent, always start on a positive, light note.

If there’s a topic to be addressed, ask questions and encourage participation. Make it very clear that “when the team has a problem, it will be solved as a team.”

Initially, it might be difficult to get your employees to open up and offer input. For them, the manager is the boss (“el patrón”) and he is always right. The last thing they want to do is create trouble or upset him in any way.

So when starting with a training session explain to the employees not only what they are supposed to do but also the consequences (for the dairy) of not doing so. Get a discussion going on why they think the incorrect way of doing things will not work. Show the right way and give a brief explanation on why it should be done that way.

The last thing we want is a passive audience that nods at every recommendation, only to leave and continue to perform as usual. If that is the case, try another approach.

It is very important to consider the literacy of the group and use as many visual aids as possible. Make comparisons to real-life situations which they can relate to.

Training sessions may be necessary
A preliminary visit to the dairy by the person who will perform any training you have scheduled is always useful. In that visit, the trainer evaluates the practices currently performed and looks at any possible flaws in the procedures. Digital cameras are very handy to take pictures of good and bad practices. Pictures capture attention.

Don't focus exclusively in what you see wrong and want corrected. Hispanic employees take pride in their work and if you come down on them too hard you will more than likely have them resisting changes you want to implement in the future. Praise what you see is well done, and ask questions as to why they are doing it that way. You may be surprised at what they already know!

Once the trainer has presented the theory behind the practice, he should accompany the employees to watch
them in action and reinforce with action what was explained in theory.

You could explain the importance of teat dip contact time or time elapsed between fore-stripping and unit attachment. However, if you go to the parlor and have one employee time another who is performing this task, both of them will learn faster and better. Check that they are doing what you have just trained them to do, and don’t forget to let them know how satisfied you are with how they are doing it.

If you find they are not doing exactly what you need, explain again and have them run through the procedure again.

Don’t be discouraged if everything doesn’t go as planned after the first training session. There’s sometimes confusion and maybe even going back to old habits. Re-train until everything goes as smoothly as you want.

During the re-training session ask them to explain in their own words the right way to do things and why. Have them talk! Remember, if they don’t speak up it is out of respect. And, like every other person you know, they don’t want to make mistakes in front of the trainer, owner, and/or peers.

**Overcome the language barrier**

As owner/manager of the dairy, it would be a good idea for you to learn some Spanish if you plan to be in the dairy business long-term.

You don’t need to be proficient enough to be able to read and understand a Spanish newspaper! It’s enough to be able to communicate with your employees even with broken sentences or concepts. Have with you a dictionary at all times and practice new words with your employees every day.

The other alternative is to have your employees learn English. There are government funded programs available in several areas of the country that do this for free. An example are the “Career Learning Centers” funded through the Workforce Investment Act.

You can even contact the Modern Languages Department at your closest university and start a program with students that would like to gain expertise by teaching English to your employees. This is a win-win situation because the students will also learn Spanish from native speakers.

Finally, you can always have a translator attend your meetings. This is easier said than done and it might even be expensive. A translator does not help improve the communication between the manager and his employees. And he does not necessarily help build the “team spirit” at the dairy.

**Post standard operating procedures**

The outcomes of the training sessions are “Standard Operating Procedures” (SOP) for the dairy. These SOP should be written in both English and Spanish and posted in a visible area of the dairy frequented by your employees.

Needless to say, you have to consider the degree of literacy of your employees. Even if they can all read and write SOPs, keep the plans to the point. Lengthy procedures will only guarantee they will not be read.

Use drawings or pictures when appropriate. Again, do not assume that, because you had a training session and have your SOPs in place, you’re done. Use your regular monthly meetings to revisit how everything is going and ask if they have ideas that might help make their jobs easier.

If you find there are still loose ends, retrain and evaluate periodically. Make sure that if you have established a SOP, you provide them with the means to accomplish it. If it was stressed that wearing clean gloves is critical as part of a milking routine, try not to complain when they go through a few more gloves than anticipated. Just a few more boxes of gloves might be the difference between a low somatic cell count herd and one that’s treating and/or culling several cows due to mastitis.

**Build on the team concept**

Discuss your goals periodically with your employees.

If your current problem is high somatic cell counts, they have to understand why this is happening, what the team can do to decrease the count, and why allowing the problem to continue will impact the bottom-line of your operation.

Once they understand the reasons behind the problem, it is more likely they will be able to determine how it started and how they can get it back under control. It’s their dairy and their cows. Let them take ownership of the problem.
Throw a “success party”
Never disregard the importance of incentives and celebrating milestones or accomplishments.

Set measurable objectives—bringing somatic cell counts down, for example—and when that happens, celebrate with your employees. You can throw a pizza party or share part of the premiums with them. Or do both!

Quality premiums are usually a minor component of the economic benefits you will be reaping. The economic rewards in terms of increased milk production, decreased mastitis treatment costs, lower veterinary expenses, reduced culling rates, and more replacement heifers available are more important to you. Sharing the premium may be more important to your employees.

What’s important to your employees should be important to you
Building a successful team entails paying attention to what's important to the employees and helping them when problems arise. They will appreciate your concern and it will only increase their loyalty toward the operation.

This can be accomplished by having parties to celebrate holidays that are important to their nationality and/or culture.

Consider an employee-of-the-month award and post it for everyone to see. Make sure that the reason why the award is being granted is stated, and that it will be rotated among the employees. Although some might consistently perform their job better than others, there's always something to praise in everyone.

If a particular employee cannot be praised at all, why is he/she still working for the dairy?

Fortunately for you and your dairy operation, there are plenty of good Spanish speaking employees out there. Hiring and working with them is a necessary solution for dairy farms. Most dairies agree that they are hard-working individuals and, when properly trained, can be an asset for the operation. The language and cultural barriers can be overcome with a little effort from both sides. The learning will not be all one-sided. You too will grow in understanding and appreciation of another culture and your dairy operation will become more successful.

References