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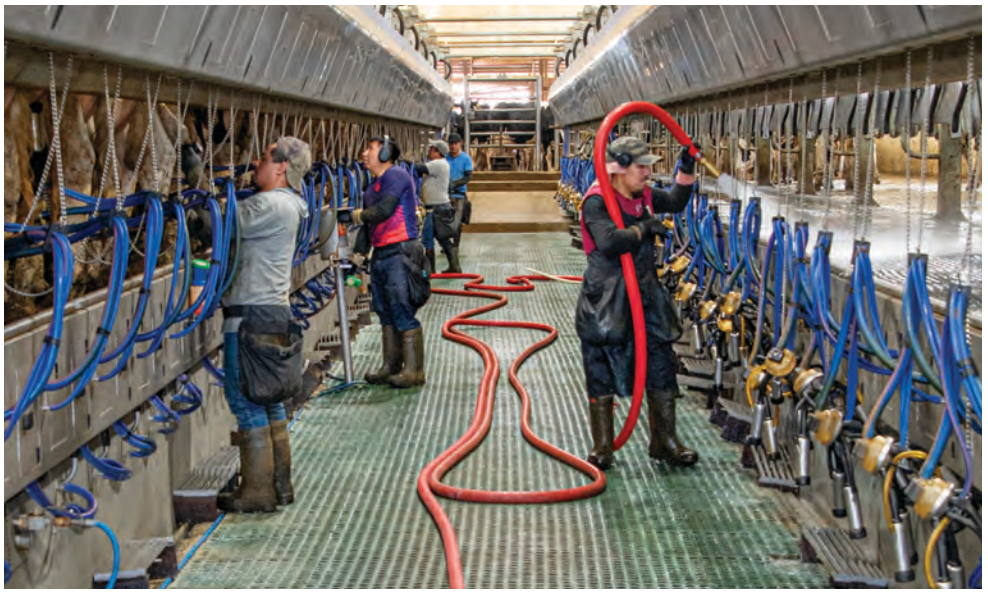
RETENTION-FOCUSED TRAINING LEADS TO POSITIVE RESULTS

Employees value relevance and interaction when learning new skills.

by Kathryn E. Childs



IT ISN'T so much that people don't want to learn, it's that they don't want to be made to learn. Instruction by way of mandating — inherently an imposition of necessity — has a way of eliciting, to put it graciously, lackluster appeal. This is common among adult learners, in particular, who tend to approach new material through the lens of practicality rather than curiosity. Oh, to be a child again — in the spring of one's relation to the world.

Since retrograde aging remains a thing of science fiction, we must deal with what we've got. In employment relationships, this means developing instructional material that directly opposes disengaged learning, instead prioritizing what it means to learn new skills as an adult worker and applying this awareness to onboarding and training procedures.

Two avenues by which to approach trainings effectively, according to Jim Versweyveld of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension, are prioritizing interactive activities and accentuating problem-solution correlations.

Is your training interactive?

As Versweyveld noted in a Badger Dairy Insight webinar, adults retain approximately 10% of what they see, 30% to 40% of what they see and hear, and 90% of what they see, hear, and do. This means information communicated visually, audibly, and kinesthetically will have a 50% to 80% higher probability of being retained than that of the same information communicated by just one or two of the three ways.

Thus, a training session that relies solely on a speaker, a video, or an activity is going to be ineffective compared to that which relies on a combination of all three. Not only does interactive training come with the benefit of team building and interpersonal growth, but it also provides employees with the opportunity to gain applicable experience that directly relates to their jobs.

"Interactive training includes simulations, games, assessments — anything that helps employees stay active in the learning process and gets them out of their chairs," Versweyveld said.

This approach has the further benefit of adhering to each of the three learning styles, which correlate to the aforementioned instruction tactics: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. By building a well-rounded, interactive presentation, an employer may replace the familiar image of monotonous conference room training with one that feels interesting and gratifying.

"Adult learners also benefit from frequent practice of any new skill," Versweyveld added. "Memorization doesn't work as well as opportunities for hands-on, interactive application."

Is your training relevant?

To learn a new skill means to admit ignorance — to admit there is something you do not know how to do. Not everyone — not anyone, realistically — enjoys acknowledging such. Therefore, when conducting a training, it's important to highlight the value of the information it contains in order to preserve employees' interest in and appreciation for that which they're learning.

As a curious life-long learner, I find myself continually asking "why" in regard to the majority of what I encounter. This is what fuels my writing. Employees, too, want to know the "why" behind what they are being asked to do. Why is this change important? What makes it necessary? What does it have to do with me? Recognition of a training's relevance can mean the difference between disengagement and retention.

One way to communicate the "why" behind a new procedure is to frame it as a solution to a problem. For example, "X is what's happening, and Y is how we're going to fix it." This spawns a greater appreciation for what is being taught and an organic interest in how to apply the information to individual habits and behaviors.

"Adult learners want real-world applications," Versweyveld said. "They want to have inner motivation for why they need certain skills."

A problem-solution formula offers a sense of practicality to what's being taught. For adult learners, this equals an edifying learning environment.

Bringing it all together

Training doesn't have to be the mind-numbing "let's get through this as soon as possible" experience most of us are accustomed to. It takes some effort on behalf of the employer, but trainings can, in fact, be a positive learning experience for all involved.

To get the most value out of a session, consider relevance, interaction, and learning styles, as well as how to deliver training content in an engaging manner.

If you are interested in learning more about these training tactics as an employer, Versweyveld cited www.farms.extension.wisc.edu and the UW-Madison Division of Extension course "Becoming an employer of choice" as avenues to explore. 1000+

■ The author is a freelance writer based in Rockford, Ill.

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THESE OWNERS MANAGE DAIRIES ON MULTIPLE SITES

During a panel discussion, several dairy producers offered advice about expanding a dairy over multiple sites.

by Barry Bradford, Jackie Boerman, and Maurice Eastridge

FOR the third year, the Tri-State Dairy Nutrition Conference hosted an on-farm fall field day to provide another opportunity for the dairy industry to come together and exchange ideas. This year's topic was "Managing for the best and planning for the worst on dairies," and the event was hosted on SwissLane Farms in Alto, Mich.

A panel of dairy farmers who milk cows on multiple sites kicked off the event and answered questions related to transitioning from single site to multiple site management and what they learned through that process. Panelists were John Douglas of Catalpadale Dairy Ltd., Brian Houin of Homestead Dairy LLC, and Lotte De Saegher-Peet of De Saegher Dairy. In addition, Tom Oesch, Annie Link, and Matt Oesch of SwissLane Farms shared their insights prior to the farm walk-through in the afternoon.

Advice for others

While each farm's experiences were unique, some common themes emerged.

1. Permitting takes time.

The policies and processes for site permits differ dramatically across states and professional consultants will be needed to navigate the process. In many cases, it is wise to determine everything you might eventually want on a given site in the future and apply for a permit to cover those long-term plans.

Purchasing a farm with an existing permit adds substantial value, particularly when a farm is trying to expand quickly. At least one example was given where land was sold because the permitting process was too slow to align with farm goals.

Since these producers had farms in multiple states, they were able to comment that there are differences in permitting timelines across states and that the growing demand for digester projects may have slowed down permitting in some states.

2. Centralize what you can to maximize efficiency.

Two farms centralized maternity areas and heifer raising to optimize allocation of resources — both labor and facilities. Although there are added complexities and costs associated with moving fresh cows between sites, several farms found that having their best employees manage transition cows more than justified this additional hassle.

On the other hand, centralized calving does not fit every operation. It is important to continually evaluate what works and what needs adjusting. Several farms also commented on the value of having a common nutrition and veterinary service across their sites in order to have more consistent and holistic recommendations.

3. Creative solutions are needed to address labor challenges.

All the speakers alluded to the challenge of learning how to shift from direct management of farm tasks to increasingly trusting employees to execute tasks and make sound decisions. Each farm has struggled to consistently find reliable employees, and they've landed on a variety of solutions.

Some have explored TN visas in order to bring in specialized labor. Adopting robotic technology allowed one farm to employ different types of workers who have showed more longevity than traditional milkers. Retention of existing employees

on a newly purchased dairy is a unique situation that requires clear communication and excellent follow-through on commitments.

Regardless of how labor is initially found, there is the need to out-pay other local options in order to retain employees over the long term. Additionally, several of the farms rely heavily on family members in management roles, which was highly valued but also required intentional means of communication.

4. Build up cow inventory prior to expansion.

All farms mentioned the need to accumulate enough cows to rapidly populate new facilities, even when that results in excessive stocking densities during the construction process. Producers noted that you cannot afford to have facilities less than full, and with the high costs of replacements now, this may be even more true today. Raising heifers from your own herd reduces uncertainty about their productive potential and cuts biosecurity risks.

5. Technology has a place.

Some farms have implemented activity monitors to help with the identification of sick cows or those in estrus; others utilize robotic milkers and autofeeders for calves in order to save on labor and expand the data that can be utilized. Although these technologies have helped improve uniformity of management and labor efficiency, it was noted that technology use has to align with the interests and style of the managers. Style of parlors used differed with preference and efficiency for size of the respective herds.

Why they chose to grow

The closing question from the audience was, "Why do you want to keep expanding and milk more cows?" Both John Douglas and the Oesch family indicated that expansion was a necessity to be competitive in the dairy industry and to support multiple family units.

Brian Houin pointed to the vision his father had that in order to support all of the family members who wanted to be involved in the dairy, they had to get larger. Houin also spoke of his desire to build a dairy from the ground up and be able to design a farm that would work best for them. That was a personal goal and motivation for him to grow in the 2010s. That farm included robotic milkers and additional technology that aligned with the family's vision for how they wanted to continue to dairy farm.

Several panelists landed on the concept that approximately 1,000 cows are needed to support a family in today's dairy business; thus, a dairy with seven families depending on it may need to scale to 7,000 cows to support all of the partners.

Lotte De Saegher-Peet's response concluded the panel discussion. She spoke of her parents moving from Belgium to Michigan in 1999 and of her dad's struggle in the early years to be successful in the dairy industry on a very small farm. These years of struggle continue to motivate her father and the entire family.

From her perspective, her family did not leave their family and their homeland to come to the U.S. and be mediocre. In the U.S., they expand because they can.

Overall, the program provided valuable insights from forward-thinking dairy farmers across Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. These farmers were open about their experiences and the challenges associated with expansion as well as the necessity to grow in order to continue to be dairy farmers in the future. 1000+

■ The authors are the C.E. Meadows endowed chair in Dairy Management at Michigan State University, an associate professor at Purdue University, and a professor and dairy extension specialist at The Ohio State University, respectively.

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YOUR LEAST EXCITING RATION IS STILL IMPORTANT

Feeding dry cows correctly will pay dividends across the dairy, so be careful to not pinch too many pennies in this area.

by Steve Martin

THERE is no question which ration on a dairy receives the least attention. Often overlooked is the diet for the far-off dry cows. In the old days, we had to be sure that these vacationing cows weren't simply put out of sight and out of mind where they could fend for themselves in some makeshift pasture or a drylot with a bale of free choice hay. Though we have come a long way since then, the far-off dry cow ration is still an important diet that needs adequate attention. The dry period is important for many physiological reasons, and saving too much money on what is probably already the least cost per pound of dry matter formulation on the dairy is risky business.

As with all rations, we want to aggressively manage cost and be sure the cows get what they need to recover and get ready for another lactation. In preparation for this article, I took a look at the nutrient requirements table in the back of the new NASEM nutrition guide to see how my recent formulations have compared to the updated official guidelines. I think the best way to describe my findings is to say that the far-off dry cows have few demands on our powerful nutrition formulation programs!

Focus on what's needed

I have a suspicion that many far off dry cow rations may, in fact, be overformulated. When looking across the macromineral, trace mineral, and vitamin requirement rows, all are pretty modest with one exception. I expect many far-off dry cows are fed in excess for all of these micronutrients except vitamin E. The vitamin E level of 1,182 international units (IU) per day is a healthy amount. As you know, vitamin E has antioxidant properties and is broadly considered important in immunity and overall animal health. Recently dried-off cows certainly have had a stressful experience that can be problematic with the cessation of milking. And since vitamin E is fat-soluble, achieving high levels in the body in preparation for parturition is a good idea. So, check your Vitamin E levels and see where they are. You might need a bump.

The bad news is that vitamin E is one of the more expensive micronutrients. However, we should take care to not get too bothered about some additional investments if needed. This group of animals represents only around 15% of the total mature herd. It is possible that some other nutrients might be lowered, and you can reinvest that savings to help pay for at least some of the vitamin E. It is worth it.

Similar to pregnant heifers

What about energy and protein? It should be noted that these requirements are fairly close to those of pregnant heifers. Crude protein levels are in the 12% to 13% range with the protein quality needs somewhat higher for the heifers. This small extra amount won't hurt the dry cows, and if sharing a ration simplifies the dairy, it could be a good fit. One note for both is a minimum rumen degradable protein (RDP) of 10%.

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WHEN FEEDING DRY COWS, do not overfeed energy and use a correctly formulated vitamin and mineral supplement.

This can be difficult to achieve in rations using distillers grains as the key protein supplier. Small amounts of urea can be added to assist here. This will cause crude protein levels to be elevated but with no negative impacts on the cows or the heifers. Many distillers-based dry cow and heifer diets are in excess of the crude protein requirement when meeting energy minimums in a diet heavy in low-quality roughages like straw or corn stalks.

Likewise, energy density needs are a bit higher for the heifers, but this energy can easily be acquired by a little extra intake that heifers always seem willing to eat. These diets tend to be around 60 net energy for lactation (NEL). Looking back at the vitamin E requirement for the dry cows, heifers will certainly be in excess of their requirement, and the cost increase here may suggest they have different minerals and rations to better target each. Each dairy can weigh the plusses and minuses of the potential convenience and the added cost. Based on my experience, you can have nice springers and healthy dry cows ready to enter the close-up pen when they share a ration.

At times, I see a farm use ionophores in heifer rations but not with far-off dry cows. The evidence and science would suggest an efficiency improvement when these are fed. As well, in our new sustainability-impacted environment, methane reduction can be achieved by feeding an ionophore. Just be sure to watch the level of the ionophore in each diet for the different classes of animals. Monensin is the ionophore of choice if far-off dry cows and pregnant heifers share either a mineral supplement or the total ration.

Variable options

Back in the "send them out to pasture" days, we were very negative on the forage quality that was often offered to dry cows. The funny thing is that now we love to feed these low-quality roughages to dry cows. Using wheat straw, corn stalks, grass hay, and some pretty "trashy" cotton by-products is perfect for these cows, but only as a part of a balanced diet.

Similarly, can low-cost, opportunity by-product ingredients be used? We must ask the same question about refusals. What these two ingredient types have in common is an inconsistent supply and probable variability in nutrient density and moisture content. Diets for far-off dry cows are a good place to take advantage of these lower-cost ingredients. Using the alternate ration function in your feeding software and including ingredients like wet brewers grain, wet beet pulp, various vegetable leftovers, and lactating ration refusals can save significant cost. These cows have solid, high roughage rations and healthy rumens that seem to go with the flow with careful ration changes based on variable supplies. This approach takes some effort and can be successful. The risk to be concerned about is an oversupply and potential overfeeding of these opportunity ingredients and having heavy, over-conditioned animals as a result.

When looking at far-off dry cow rations, we have many options. They are great places to save some feed cost by taking advantage of variable ingredients, and much care should be taken there. At the same time, these diets have an infinite number of successful formulations that can easily supply the needs of the dry cow. Take care to not overfeed energy and use a correctly formulated vitamin/mineral supplement that probably offers more vitamin E than you thought. Feeding dry cows correctly is a small detail that will pay dividends across the dairy, and saving too much money on this diet will likely come back and bite you. 1000+

■ The author is the founder of DNMCmilk, which works with dairy producers and heifer growers in several regions of the U.S. and around the world.