

How to Make the Most of my Multicultural Workforce

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The success of a dairy operation today results from the right people doing the right things. As dairies grow in complexity –just like any other agricultural and business enterprises- managers are forced to expand their functions and deal with labor issues like never before. Managers are faced with the challenge of attracting the right person and subsequently develop and retain employees able and willing to perform their jobs.

To meet the workforce demands in different regions, dairies have hired Hispanic people to assist on the farm. As a result, a multicultural environment is created and Hispanic employees become a very valuable part of the workforce. The fundamental goal of the manager turns out to be the establishment of an environment that promotes productivity. This is a setting that values differences and facilitates communication. Ultimately it is creating a “way to do things” unique to the operation that allows the team to reach common objectives.

Dairy Management: A Paradigm Shift?

By definition managers ought to use resources effectively. As a consequence, oftentimes energy is exclusively directed to those material resources, overlooking the one that makes other systems work: the human resource. Managers have been forced to expand their role to become “Managers of People” more than only resource, or cow managers. We can say this is a Paradigm shift, from managing cows to leading people.

We could summarize the role of the manager in 5 broad functions:

1. Planning. Developing the business purpose, philosophy, goals, and strategies.
2. Organizing. That is establishing a system of roles that allows achieving goals. It involves defining and dividing work.
3. Staffing. Attracting, developing, and retaining people able and willing to perform the jobs
4. Leading. Directly influencing people and facilitating their work.
5. Controlling. This is assessing results against objectives and correcting where required.

(Rosenberg, 2002)

In the end, managers need to make things happen through people. And this is where a manager can become a leader. Perhaps the most important function in this sense would be the ability to guide people; the ability to inspire employees by setting a compelling example. A leader understands where the business wants to go and in communicating this vision provides perspective and gives a sense of purpose and meaning to what people do (Estrada and Morales, 2001).

A Brief Comment on Cultural Differences

The workforce demands in different regions of the U.S. have motivated dairies to hire Hispanic people. This creates a setting where employees speak different languages and share their diverse cultural backgrounds. In a very practical way, the manager needs to make sure that her team is productive and effective. A manager needs to communicate what needs to be done and how. Therefore, she needs to overcome language, and cultural barriers. It is the role of the manager to promote an environment that respects and values the cultural differences of individuals. A first step is to be open to see certain behaviors as just different instead of judging them as “better or worse than my own.”

For example, when communicating, we could notice a tendency to see the following differences:

	Anglo- American	Hispanic
Communication	Exchange information	Build relationships
Distance (speaking)	2 ft	Closer
Touch	No need, at times uncomfortable	Sign of friendship, hugging, shake hands
Meaning	Derived from words	Derived from context (setting, status, nonverbal)

Please keep in mind there is no right or wrong way. It is impossible to label people or define behavior exclusively by culture, education or experience.

In an attempt to understand the reasons for some differences, we can consider four dimensions that can be compared from one culture to another:

1) Power Distance, 2) Collectivism vs. Individualism, 3) Femininity vs. Masculinity, 4) Uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede.)

A detailed description goes beyond the scope of this paper. We could mention that in general terms, in Latin American countries there will be a greater power distance between groups which causes those in authority to be more respected and not questioned. These societies tend to be more collective which means that interaction at work is important and expected, relationships are placed before business or tasks, there is an important sense of belonging (family, friends). These characteristics contrast with the U.S. more individualist society where the individual success prevails over the group, children are taught to be independent, employees want to be seen as individuals. The Hispanic culture would be more feminine, which means more emphasis on people and

warm relationships, a high sensitivity to insult and the establishment of a friendly workplace. For more information please refer to the excellent review by Maloney, 2004

Managers can better relate to and guide their Hispanic or multicultural workers when they care and make an effort to understand some of these differences. They can even use them to motivate. Little details can go a long way, for example recognizing important dates such as the Independence Day of their countries, birthdays and other celebrations and promoting group interaction.

The Culture of the Business

From a dairy management perspective we will now use “Culture” or “Business Culture” to describe “the way we do things around here.” The culture of the organization is the set of norms and values, the ways to act, react, and handle problems.

Every business develops a culture. Sometimes there is a conscious effort, other times it happens mechanically and even unwillingly by repetition. Let me illustrate this. There may be rules to be on time for milking, or to speak respectfully, or to handle cows with care. What happens when some of the employees with more experience are often late with no consequences? What is really acceptable when the herdsman is allowed to insult subordinates? What is the culture if nobody reacts when an impatient worker hurts an animal? In the end the culture of the business is the way we do things and is to be cultivated all the time.

Employees learn the culture through “heroes” or exemplary actions; through language and symbols such as pictures, logos, dress; through stories and rituals, such as the celebration of accomplishments, anniversaries, and birthdays. (Erven, 2004) Having regular meetings, a clean working place and recognizing labor special efforts become all part of the culture.

When dealing with employees from different backgrounds e.g. Hispanic Labor, the business culture can play an even more important role. There is a greater sense of collectiveness, a need to belong to a group and to be accepted. A strong positive culture provides the needed framework. It sends a message without words about the accepted behaviors such as timeliness, respect, accountability, and valuing opinions. Hispanic individuals, Latin Americans and other “high context” groups are highly sensitive to this kind of unspoken communication. The take-home message: Communicate the business culture with words, but more importantly live the culture with consistent actions.

Making Things Happen

The manager of a dairy is ultimately responsible for reaching productivity and business goals. To do that he needs to communicate, guide, control and monitor the different aspect of the system. A multicultural environment enjoys the benefit of having diverse ways of looking at things, different experiences that can be applied to solve problems or improve. On the other hand a multicultural labor force also presents challenges with communication and organization. The following are ideas of tools to help smooth the process, increase consistency and facilitate communication. They are

useful in any dairy, but they might be even more significant in dairies with employees of diverse cultural backgrounds:

- 1) Develop a simple but informative employee handbook.
 - 2) Define the needs of the dairy and develop job descriptions.
 - 3) Establish Standard Operation Procedures
 - 4) Establish a formal training program.
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- 1) Employee Handbook. Include a welcome statement, organization chart, mission of the business, general guidelines and norms of conduct. Include also policies, safety norms, information about benefits and wages.
 - 2) Job Descriptions are an important management tool. They define responsibilities and clearly describe what the job is. Well-designed jobs make sure that the necessary work is done timely; in addition they can keep employees challenged and motivated. Job descriptions also provide a means for evaluating job performance. When a farm hires Hispanic Workers, the language barrier increases the need for maximum clarity about what is needed and expected. Job descriptions can enhance communication and facilitate the definition of goals and responsibilities. A written job description can become an excellent reference, and base for training and evaluation. The job description generally includes the title of the job, a brief summary of the job, relationships, working conditions and salary. To better communicate, some dairy operations are providing a job description both in English and Spanish. Include a clear job title, a job summary, the job responsibilities, relationships, working conditions and salary.
 - 3) Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). These materials both in English and the language of the employee (in this case Spanish) help create a mental image of the tasks to be performed. They are excellent training tools and they set the ground for evaluation.
 - 4) Training in a dairy should be an ongoing and active process. It could be narrowed down to five points: Explain, Show, Practice, Observe, Praise (Blanchard, 1994):
 1. Explain. Describe the procedure and explain why each step is important. It needs to be clear and delivered in a simple manner.
 2. Show. This is demonstrating every step of a procedure paying special attention to the key points.
 3. Practice. Let the employee try. This gives a great opportunity to answer any questions he/she could have. It could be necessary to show certain points again, but investing time here will prevent future misunderstandings.
 4. Observe. Make sure that the procedure is being implemented correctly. It is easier to modify behavior early in the process than trying to change habits developed over a long time.
 5. Praise. Praise for a job well done. Even if you need to correct some steps, praise for the ones done right and help the employee modify whatever is needed.

Dairies have the opportunity to make training a great motivator, because it helps the employee understand the importance of her job. Training can trigger new interest in employees and open opportunities to take new roles. Training can also help workers see the big picture and imagine the future. In a multicultural environment communication is a challenge. The nature of the dairy operation usually restricts the time available for training and limits the attention span of the audience. Every individual will also show a preferred learning style. Usually the trainer doesn't know the student that well and therefore is better to send a message touching as many senses as possible. With time managers can identify individual needs, but in general, there are a couple factors to consider with a diverse workforce. Román-Muñiz mentions that based on the collectiveness sense of Hispanic and Latin American labor, an ideal training environment is group learning. Creating an environment where they are invited to ask questions and even to disagree is important. The concept of "power distance" refers to the degree to which power, prestige and wealth are unequally distributed in a culture. According to Wlodkowski, for the Anglo American the sense of power distance is relatively low, but for Latin American countries it can be greater based on the magnitude of inequity of power and wealth (Wlodkowski, cited by Román-Muñiz, 2004.) That means that the laborers could see in the trainer (farm manager, veterinarian, farm owner) an authority far separated from them. To improve communication, an environment should be created, where everyone is welcome to share experiences and points of view without fear of negative consequences. A very common complaint I hear from workers in dairies is that management will not listen to them: "they either don't have the time, or don't think it is important."

The Manager as a Leader

Let's go back to the five broad functions of the manager: planning (forces me to define goals and vision), organizing (sets the ground to reach those goals), staffing (not only attracting, but also retaining and developing people), leading and controlling. Controlling refers to assessing performance against objectives. It involves providing feedback, negative feedback to correct, but also positive, to reinforce. Positive feedback is in itself a form of recognition, a very powerful way to motivate employees, particularly employees from a Hispanic background.

Now let's talk briefly about leading. As a manager this can be the most important function long term, for the business and the workers. The best leaders in a dairy operation inspire their employees. This is a great responsibility but a very rewarding one. It helps management stay focused and enthused at the same time as it is inviting people to follow. Management needs to lead by example. "I expect my employees to complete every task they committed to perform, by the same token I don't break my promises and I make every effort not to forget what I offered."

The manager as a leader is charged with helping workers develop and enrich their jobs. A good way to help employees understand the importance of their role is to ask them to put together a task list for the different days of the week. Ask them to rank tasks in order of importance. Compare it to what you think should be a regular week of work. This process actually makes employees contribute in the design or redesign of

their jobs. This simple analysis will give the employee a sense of ownership and control; done right it will even identify areas for improved efficiency. This could be the first step in keeping people motivated and challenged. It could result in employees wanting to enrich their current jobs and take on more responsibility.

As a leader, the manager should communicate a compelling vision. Employees in dairies many times feel isolated from the rest of the business. Language differences can accentuate this isolation. A good example is the one of milkers who spends many hours in the parlor with little communication with the rest of the operation. When these employees are able to see their jobs as a very important component of a “bigger whole”, it will be easier for them to feel proud of it. When they know they are valued, it will be easier for them to contribute ideas to improve the operation. This is important with any labor team, but it could be even more powerful with a Hispanic group.

As a leader, you set expectations: Expect a lot from your employees.

Research shows there is a powerful influence of one person’s expectations on another’s behavior. It has been proven that the way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them. So, when managers’ expectations are high, productivity is likely to be high. It could be said that the way a subordinate performs is largely determined by what the manager expected of that person (Livingston, 1988).

A Final Comment

With dairies growing in complexity the workforce demands increase and often times a multicultural environment is created. The manager of a dairy is suddenly dealing with labor issues like never before. The role of the manager has been expanded. Although the cow remains the central figure in a dairy, the intricacy of the operation requires management to divide tasks, to delegate and depend on more people. A new level of organization and communication are needed to be effective, a new level of leadership. Enjoy being that leader, communicate your vision of the business, help people develop and contribute, inspire them to reach common goals. As a manager you are challenged with making the most of the workforce: a great responsibility but a very rewarding one.

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