

# Five key factors to create a culture of excellence at your dairy

Enrique Schcolnik for *Progressive Dairyman*

As a dairy veterinarian and nutritionist that has been training dairy employees for more than 12 years, I have been interested in identifying what makes a group of dairy employees better than another. I also often find myself observing how employees work in other businesses as well. Since it seems that at most businesses “everything happens through people,” when I am at a hardware store, bank or simply getting a cheeseburger, I make an effort to recognize what key factors make a particular employee group excellent. There are some businesses where you can really see that an incredibly positive attitude permeates the workplace and that the employees are performing well as a group. Have you ever left a business wondering how you could do that with your employees?

The purpose of this article is to discuss how you can create a culture of excellence at your dairy and not only reap the financial benefits of having the best workforce in the industry, but also provide a great environment for your employees and for your cows.

Drawing upon my experience and that of Matt Budine, a colleague of mine who at one point supervised more than 180 employees, we have identified five critical factors that are absolutely necessary to create a culture of excellence at your dairy.

- 1 Employee selection
- 2 Training and education
- 3 Organizational structure

## 4 Consistent message

## 5 Effective feedback and communication

### Employee selection

Select employees that demonstrate a history of good behavior in life and work. We recommend that you use an employee interview form that asks questions to help you select employees who are hard-working, honest, open to learning, team players and passionate about working in our industry long term.

Create your own questionnaire and ask the employee to give specific examples of how they were able to be team players or how they learned a new task at a previous job. For example, ask the prospective employee how they approached learning a new task. Did they rely on an experienced employee to learn from? Did they focus on studying the training manual? Or did they just learn by doing? Ask them to give you an example of a time when they went above and beyond their duty in order to finish a job or ask them what they would do if they found a wallet on the street. Ask them for a specific situation where they had the opportunity to take the high moral ground at work or in daily life. And most importantly, look for consistency in their answers. Lastly, do not hesitate to call for references from previous employers and look for consistencies between your interview and the previous employer’s perception of the prospective employee.

### Training and education

It is important to establish a training program for every important area on the dairy and to create a budget for employee training. I often ask dairy managers about their employee training budget and receive a lot of blank stares. Believe it or not, most dairies do not have a budget for training and educating their workforce.

In most industries, employers realize that employee education brings a large return on investment. For example, when someone is employed at McDonald’s to flip a burger, they receive a thick training binder and are enrolled in a three-week training program for that specific job. It is no coincidence that the best and most profitable corporations in the world have identified employee development as one of their most important strategies for improved profitability. Many of these corporations spend 4 to 7 percent of total payroll on employee training. Therefore, for an average 1,000-cow dairy, that would translate to an employee training budget of at least \$16,000 per year.

After you have a budget for employee training, it is time to design a training program. Designing a training program for the entire dairy right away may be too big a task, so start with just three areas of highest importance such as maternity, milking parlor and feeding programs. Use consultants such as your nutritionist, veterinarian, milk equipment tech service rep or other allied industry specialists to help you get started. Make sure your training program is designed with the following four teaching strategies.



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◆ Provide a formal teaching environment. It is important to get employees together in a classroom environment. One-on-one verbal sessions are often not effective because many employees get defensive and are unable to learn one-on-one. Learning in a group is much more effective.

◆ Teach them the science required for their jobs in simple terms. For example, many milkers do not have a clear understanding of how predip chemicals work and therefore are less likely to use them when they are not being supervised. Explain to

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your milkers that predip chemicals take at least 60 seconds to kill a significant amount of bacteria on the teat surface. Predipping and attaching a machine immediately after applying a predip will not provide

the reduction in bacterial numbers needed to minimize mastitis.

◆ Use visual aids in your training programs. Remember: A picture speaks a thousand words. Most people

learn visually, so use videos, cartoons, charts, graphs and slide shows. This also helps minimize the “language barrier” in our largely Spanish-speaking crews.

◆ Make sure your employees actively participate in your education sessions. When you do a training session, ask employees how they think a task would be best performed and why. You may get wrong answers, but if you steer the employees in the right direction, they will come up with the right answer “on their own.” For example, during a feeders’ school, ask

your employees what promotes better rumen health: a) sortable ration in the feedbunk or b) a well-mixed TMR? Discuss why one answer is correct versus the other. If you allow them to participate, they will take ownership of their jobs and perform better and more consistently from day to day.

### Provide clear organizational structure

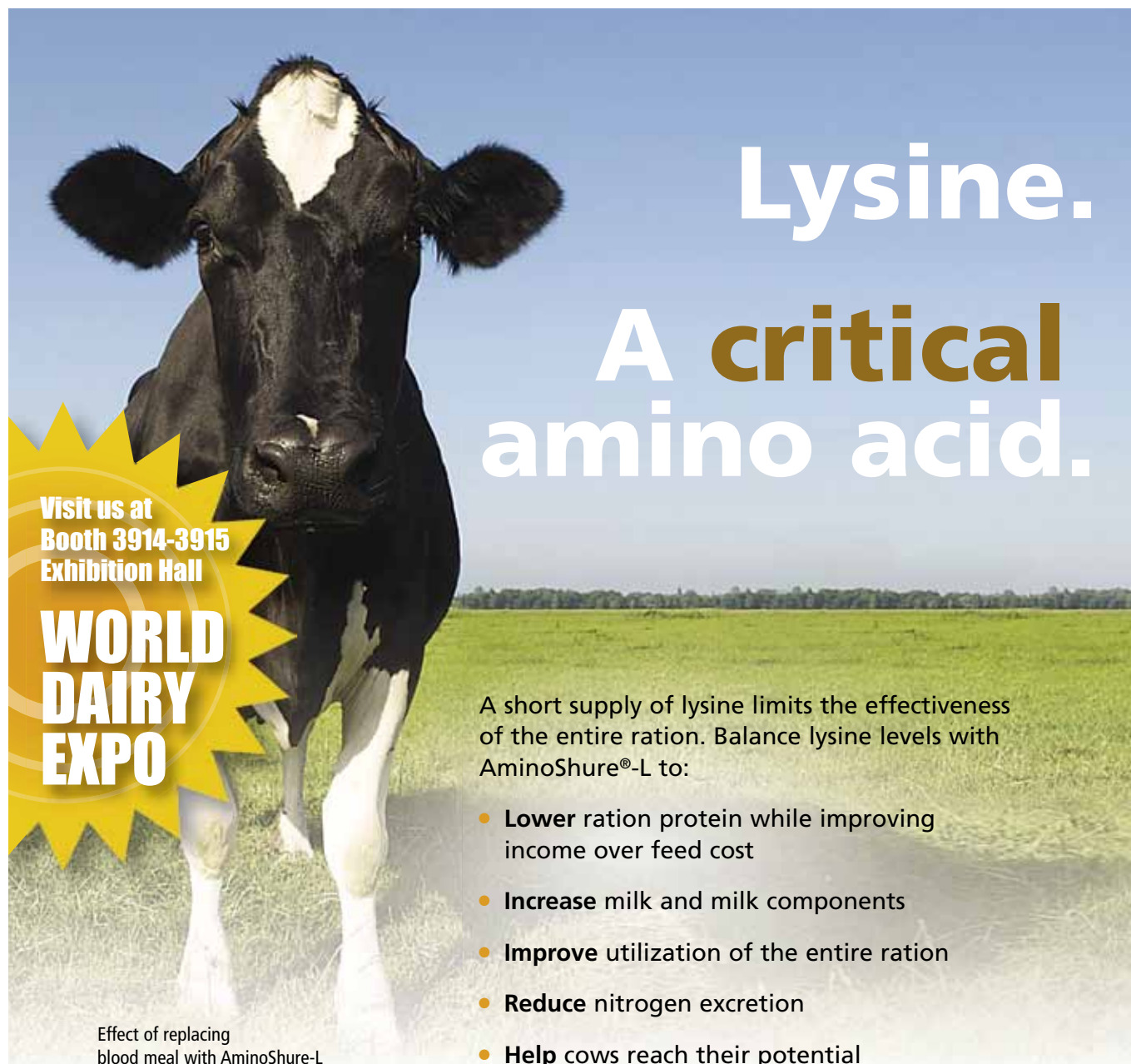
Providing a clear organizational structure of your dairy for your employees is extremely important. Teach your employees how your dairy’s hierarchy works. Some dairies may have just one manager that supervises everybody. That is okay, but make sure that everyone understands that. Make an effort to eliminate all confusion. Sometimes a worker may think he has supervising authority when he or she doesn’t. This can create animosity and friction between employees. On the other hand, the dairy manager may like to have supervisors in different areas of the dairy in order to minimize micromanagement. Make sure your employees understand the management system so that the supervisors maintain the authority to do their job.

### Deliver a consistent message

Oftentimes employees fail to follow protocol due to conflicting messages coming from management. For example, if you have rules to minimize injuries at your dairy, make no exceptions when someone breaks them, even if that employee is your longest or most loyal employee. Or if you get frustrated handling an unruly cow, don’t think you are exempt from handling that cow appropriately. No message speaks louder than your actions. If you rough up a cow, your employees will follow your example when you are not watching.

Another example involves how to manage dysfunctional interactions between employees. When employees treat each other disrespectfully they are unable to work together effectively. If you want employees to treat each other with respect, you will have to set that example first. No matter how frustrated you may be, always address your employees in a respectful manner. The culture of your

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Group	Protein	MUN (mg/dl)
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b	17% Protein	~15.5
a	17% Protein + AminoShure-L	~16.5

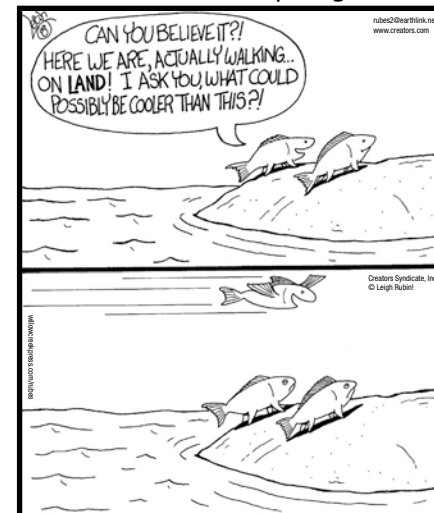
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dairy starts at the top. Also, identify problem employees, work with them and make it clear that at your dairy certain behaviors are unacceptable. Be aware that even the longest-term employees can act as the lone wolf that disrupts the team atmosphere. Address these problems as soon as possible, since they are likely costing you labor efficiency on a daily basis.

Creating a mission statement for your dairy helps convey a consistent message to your employees. In your mission statement, you could include cow handling, cooperation between employees and other issues you deem important for your operation.

### Provide constructive feedback

Both positive and negative feedback are extremely important in order to keep your employees engaged in their work. Studies have shown that no feedback is more detrimental to performance than negative feedback. However, when you, as a manager, need to address an individual about something negative, pause and take time to be thoughtful about how you provide the criticism.

Think of two things you like about that employee and give them what Matt Budine calls "sandwich feedback." First, give the employee something positive about themselves or what they are doing and next, address the behavior you want to change, with a description of what you saw and why it's not ideal. Then finish with an affirmation or positive note encouraging them that you know they can do it correctly in the future. From Budine's experience training and managing many employees, he says, "Sandwich feedback is effective at correcting and engaging employees in their work, while improving the level of work among the entire team."

The employee is more able to hear and accept the message because you haven't humiliated him or broken him down.

Remember that people do not learn when they are in a defensive position. People learn best when they feel appreciated. Employees need to understand that we want them around and we want them to continue to get better.

### Foster communication

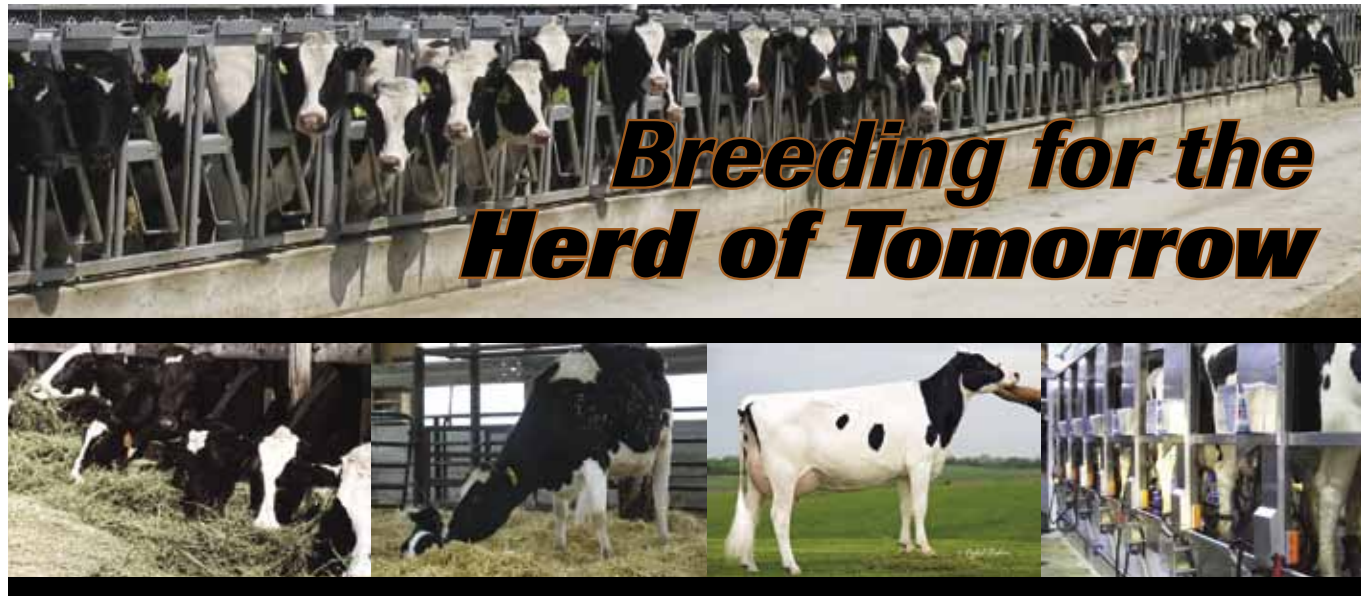
Also, encourage communication between employees and management. We often want employees to listen to us, but we

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must be open to their concerns as well. Whether you like it or not, it is better to understand your employees' needs and frustrations than to avoid them. Ask for feedback on how the manager (that may be you) is performing and address those issues

to the best of your abilities.

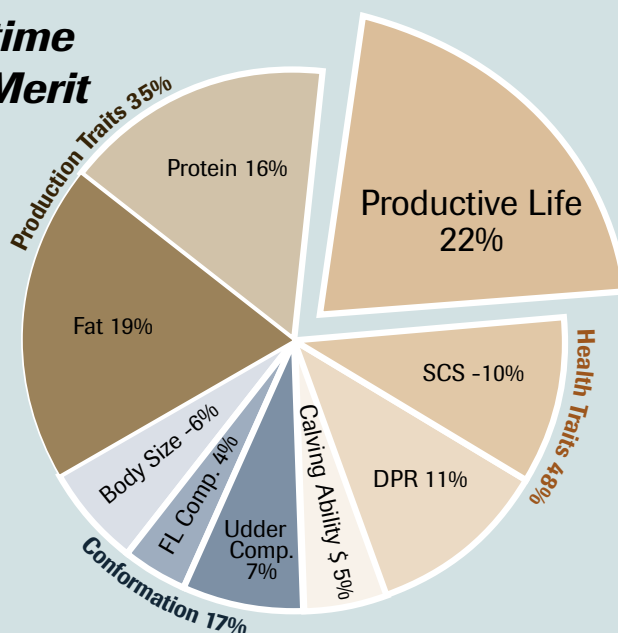
In summary, make your people a priority and with them you will be able to create a culture of excellence at your dairy. Remember, "Everything happens through people." **PD**



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**Excerpt:** "We are all farmers, we are all people. That is what's important." Jeff Fowle, AgChat Foundation board president, began the AgChat Foundation's first Agvacy 2.0 Training Conference by sharing that piece of insight in his opening speech. That theme resonated for the entire conference, as the presenters pushed all of us at the conference to humanize farmers and give faces to the men and women who put food on our plates.

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