

KEYS TO MOTIVATING FARM WORKERS TO HARVEST HIGH QUALITY MILK

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Introduction

One person not doing something properly can affect what happens that entire day on a milking operation. Managing everyday performance is a challenge, tending to employee's attitudes, training and slotting people in the correct place on the dairy, all are part of managing the Human Capital. Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of managing farm workers to get them to harvest high quality milk is to assure they are highly motivated. Milking cows is one of the most intensive jobs on a dairy, requiring focus, speed, accuracy, consistency, attention to details, yet monotonous in nature. Farm owners, managers and supervisors must be aware of these dynamics to be able to manage and lead these special workers, as they are the ones ultimately responsible and accountable for harvesting the highest quality product possible, since most of the farm's income is derived from this result.

But rarely is there a single motivating factor that will motivate farm workers that harvest quality milk, in fact it is a combination of factors that set the stage for a highly motivated team. Sometimes dairy managers have the misconception that pay is the most motivating factor. We must take into consideration that in the U.S., a large percentage of milk harvesters are immigrants, many who may be in the country for a short period of time, work very hard, utilize a small percentage of their income to live in the U.S. and then send the rest of their income to family back home. Therefore workers may appear as if what drives them the most is pay. A deeper analysis of motivating factors for milk harvesters reveals that this is not the case.

Motivation and the Milk Harvester

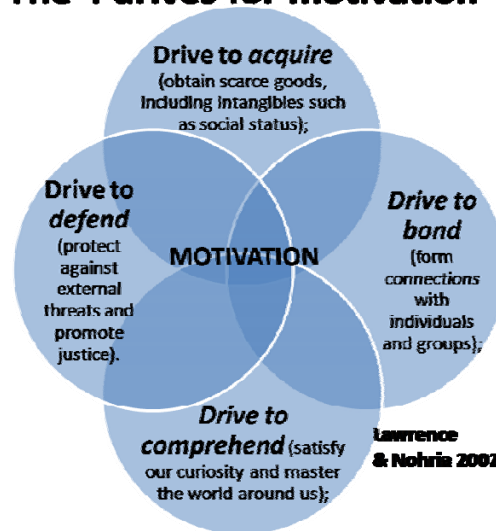
Dairies that are getting great results are great at executing swiftly, meaning they get important stuff done, stuff that matters to the bottom line such as milking the number of cows to be milked within the time frame of their shift, following the appointed procedure, they catch cows that have mastitis and conduct the proper protocol. Hopefully this happens in a motivating and engaging environment for the workers. But first of all we might ask ourselves, what can be so motivating about standing in a milking parlor for 8 hours, following the same procedure over and over to milk a certain number of cows? We know for a fact that it is motivating and fulfilling to a certain group of people, otherwise we would not have seen what we see on some dairy operations in which there are milkers who have done such work over and over for five, eight, maybe even ten years straight.

Getting employees to do their best work has always been a challenge for managers. Determining what motivates people has been a popular topic for decades. We are familiar with motivational theories from influential thinkers on human behavior, such as Aristotle, Sigmund Freud, and Abraham Maslow, and we ourselves may have our own theories as to why people do the things

they do, and how this applies to ourselves. What motivates milk harvesters to stay working in a dairy operation, instead of leaving and going to look for work somewhere else, or to look for something else to do?

Maslow and Freud didn't have the advantage of the knowledge we are acquiring today from modern brain-science. Fortunately, new cross-disciplinary research in fields like neuroscience, biology, and evolutionary psychology are allowing us to peek under the scalp, so to speak, to learn more about the human brain. This new research (Lawrence and Nohria) suggests that we are all guided by four basic emotional needs or drives that are the product of our common evolutionary heritage (see illustration below).

The 4 drives for motivation



From Lawrence and Nohria's standpoint, these drives underlie everything we do. So, as a manager, or milk harvesting supervisor, if you are attempting to boost motivation, take note. What actions, precisely, can managers take to satisfy these four drives and, thereby, increase their employees' overall motivation?

Part of the motivational research included two studies – one that surveyed 385 employees from two global businesses and one that surveyed employees from more than half of the *Fortune* 500 companies. In the dairy industry we need to pay attention to this, they measured four commonly measured workplace indicators of motivation: engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and intention to quit. Engagement represents the energy, effort, and initiative employees bring to their jobs. Satisfaction reflects the extent to which they feel that the company meets their expectations. Commitment captures the extent to which employees engage in corporate citizenship. Intention to quit is reflected in employee turnover. We need to start looking at these on our dairies, how engaged are your people? How satisfied are they with their work? How committed are they to the dairy? And do they have any intention to quit? Or maybe even better, does it matter or is it important to the long term viability of your business?

Both studies showed that an organization's ability to meet the four fundamental drives explains about 60 percent of an employee's motivation. They also found that certain drives influence some motivational factors more than others.

In the research, fulfilling the drive to bond has the greatest effect on employee commitment. But a dairy can best improve overall motivational scores by satisfying all four drives in concert. The whole is more than the sum of its parts; a poor showing on one drive substantially diminishes the impact of high scores on the other three.

By over-emphasizing individual performance, a dairy owner may squelch the spirit of camaraderie among employees (their drive to bond). He may also create a hostile environment, because it may appear he is favoring some employees over others. Employees may no longer feel they are being treated justly.

A leaders of a dairy operation must attend to the four fundamental emotional drives. They may be restricted by the rules and norms of the dairy, but employees are clever enough to know that their immediate superiors have some wiggle room. In fact, the research mentioned here shows that individual managers influence overall motivation as much as any organizational (dairy) policy does.

Training and Development

In farm language, training and development of farm workers who harvest milk has been referred to as helping them understand the "what" and the "why" behind the tasks they are asked to complete on a daily basis. In the case of the U.S. many of these workers are of Hispanic background, so the language barrier limits the amount of direct training an Anglo person can do if they are not fluent, given the limited English understanding at the front-line worker. Beyond this challenge, some employees don't necessarily have Ag background or have worked in dairy production systems that are highly mechanized. Practical day to day motivation can come from utilizing basic training methods where the milk harvester will learn new things, grow in the process and become more knowledgeable about the business and the reasons they do the work they are asked to do.

Rewards and Recognition

Gostick and Elton (2009) have developed a purpose-based recognition process for companies called The Carrot Principle. There is a direct impact of employees being and feeling rewarded and recognized on their motivation to do work, and there is evidence certainly suggesting that is the case. In the Jackson Organization survey, the majority of employees reported feeling unrecognized, and only 40 percent of employees reported high engagement and high job satisfaction. What's more, according to a 2006 survey of 14,000 workers conducted by Salary.com, 65 percent of employees are currently looking for other work. These rewards don't have to be monetary necessarily. We can account for 50% or more of the rewards and recognition just with by the one that comes from the direct supervisor of the milk harvester.

The Feeling of Success

Even if there are no specific ways to reward and recognize employees on the operation, a certain portion of motivation can come from the feeling of accomplishment. A practical way to do this is to show the results the milk harvesters are producing, whether in the form of milk production, milk quality (SCC), as long as people understand what is behind those numbers, and what they can do everyday to affect them. This feeling of success has a powerful way of acting as a motivator, it tell milk harvesters “what I do is having a direct impact on results”, “I feel successful”.

Outside Work vs. Inside Work Motivates Differently

Field observations and informal interviews with milk-harvesting personnel, plus learning styles theory and the nature of work for people allow us to take a peak into some of the things that make milkers really tick, excel and be driven to success in a milking operation. Some people like a variety of work in their day, others don't. Outside work in a dairy operation tends to have more of a variety to it, it is less constraining (not subjected to working inside 4 walls), and has more of a feel of freedom to it. Milkers instead, are the type of worker who is looking for consistency, sameness, similar work from one day to the next, they are OK with monotony, as long as the environment is not de-motivating.

Design and Environment of the Premises

Milking facilities, when being designed and thought thru are built primarily with cows in mind, flow, comfort, etc. and rightfully so, milk harvesting is such a big component of these operations. Secondly or thirdly come people and their comfort. Given the monotony of the work of harvesting milk, some things can possibly be done to improve the design and environment for the sake of improving motivation for milkers. Allowing the use (not abuse) of music in the parlor, providing comfortable boots and footing surface, the use of aprons and protection, the timing and length of breaks from work and the area where people take breaks, all can contribute to motivated milk harvesters.

Knowing What is Expected of Me, and that I am Utilizing My Abilities Every Day

It is the nature of people at work to know what is expected of them every day. In a global survey across industries of over 2 million people, the Gallup Organization found that less than 40% of employee understood clearly what was expected of them every day. The immediate supervisor has a huge role in helping milkers understand what is expected of them. Furthermore, it is very helpful for employees to know that their abilities and talents are being put to work every day. Both of these, expectations and use of abilities, contribute to the employee having the sense of motivation.

The Result of the Hiring Process on the Motivation of Existing Farm Employees

One of the most important roles in HR management is to recruit, select, hire, bring on-board and retain the highest quality human capital possible. Now, we all know that is not an easy task, but

it is something that requires a plan, a process. A lot of problems and challenges one encounters in managing people can be taken care of by doing a great job in bringing the right people on board. Some of the initial motivation milk harvesters will have in the first few months of their employment can be obtained from the process they experience when they are brought on board the dairy.

The Relationship with Their Immediate Supervisor

There is plenty of literature in organizational work that shows the direct impact the quality of the relationship worker-employee has on the staying desire, and motivation of the milk harvester. Exit interviews reveal that a bad relationship with immediate supervisor, or the way the employee felt being treated by the supervisor drove the decision to leave a place of work, ranking as a top one or two reason for leaving. In November I attended a seminar with leadership guru John Maxwell. He spoke about attitude being such an important ingredient in leadership work and in followers. Monitor attitudes, self and that of others. Attract what working environment you want, a winning one I hope, for yourself and your employees. Call poor attitudes on the carpet. The day starts with attitude.

Have a Plan, Execute on the Plan

Every great team, teams that get results, have a plan. It is very important on a dairy that wants to win, to have a plan for the day, for the week. Gather around, 5 minute meetings at the beginning of the day never hurt anyone, clarify for people what they will be concentrating on, the plan. Also, build in flexibility in the plan for unforeseen situations. It is important for people in the day to day work to feel like they have a direction, and a well described plan can provide that for them. It is helpful to employees to know how the work they do every day fits into the overall picture, what the business is trying to accomplish. Most of this needs to be communicated often by leaders at all levels in the business.

Participating in Problem Solving and Decision Making

People at the level of the organization where they are at, must be fully aware, and trained on, the daily decisions they make, the actions that follow and the impact of those decisions. Milk harvesters who feel that their opinions count, that they sense they are involved in problem-solving situations, and in the decision making process, tend to be more motivated and engaged than others who don't.

Trusted and Respected Employees

All relationships, anywhere I have been on this planet, at the very core level are based on two basic principles, trust and respect. Leading leadership research shows that any leader that wants to garner followership, must develop trust around him or herself. If people trust you, they will follow. An example of where trust comes into play, if you want to delegate something, would you be able to delegate if you don't trust someone? Also, respecting people, for where they come from, what they look like, what they believe in, and their ideas, will go a long way in them

feeling like they belong in the business. Employees who feel trusted and respected from their superiors tend to be more motivated to do the work they are asked to do, and go the extra mile.

Culture of Feedback

This is one of those daily ingredients for success with milk harvesters. PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW HOW THEY ARE DOING. Whether it is good or bad. Managers need to be observants of the daily work enough to tell people how they are doing. If doing well praise. If not doing well, correct, or reprimand. People who get feedback tend to perform better and feel more motivated, especially if they are hearing when they are doing well.

Training, Re-training and Development

Each day there is an opportunity to make a contribution to someone, finding the “teachable moments”. There are always opportunities to train and develop people, find ways to teach new things, people always appreciate learning something new. Given that some of the workers who are employed on these operations didn’t grow up in the dairy environment, or at least not in the high-tech dairy systems, many times people will need to be re-trained in the course of the first few months after they join the operation. For the milk harvester to have the feeling that he/she is trained and developed to do their work better, is a motivating factor.

Employee Engagement

A recent (2009) global survey by Hewitt & Associates reports average employee engagement in the U.S. at 55-60% while in other continents it reaches 75-80%. Engagement is important because it drives productivity. Engagement goes beyond employee satisfaction, which had been measured until recently as a measure of success with employees. Employees could be satisfied doing little to nothing. Engaged employees contribute discretionary effort, go above and beyond the call of duty, have less absenteeism and higher productivity. Engaged employees produce more for the organization, period. In the context of milk harvesting, can the organization engage milk harvesters to produce at their best? But what do we mean by engagement? The Institute for Employment Studies in the U.K. analyzed data from a 2003 attitude survey of over 10,000 employees in 14 organizations. The behaviors demonstrated by the engaged employees boiled down to:

- a belief in the organization
- a desire to work to make things better
- an understanding of business context and the ‘bigger picture’
- respectful of, and helpful to, colleagues
- a willingness to ‘go the extra mile’
- keeping up to date with developments in the field.

But engagement is two-way: organizations, meaning leadership at all levels, must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer. This engagement is very important because it can have serious impact in employee

turnover for example, which has been estimated to cost organizations 2-3 times an employee's annual salary. For a milking operation experiencing 25-35% employee turnover, this is serious negative economic impact on the operation.



Source: Institute for Employment Studies

Performance vs. Disciplinary Issues

As much as possible, distinguish between performance and disciplinary issues, they need to be managed very differently. What do you do when an employee is not following a procedure, when he/she is not following the directions or tasks assigned? Do you give them a warning in your disciplinary system or do you try to find out why he/she is not performing? Many times managers are taking care of performance issues with disciplinary systems because it is a nice shortcut.

Employee Turnover

Without hesitation we can say that employee turnover in a dairy operation tends to be the highest in the milk harvesting department. The factors that affect that turnover vary. The factors that affect these employee's motivations vary. For milk harvesters to understand or make sense of the reasons why employees left, how the team handled that, and also how the team handled new employees who came in new, is important in maintaining their motivation or feeling demotivated.

Team Dynamics

Milk harvesting is a team sport. Rarely can a dairy operation achieve the success it needs to be profitable in producing milk quantity and quality without the work of a team of people. More often than we would like to admit, human dynamics come into play in the quality of team work being done. At times differences in opinion or ways of doing work, or attitude drive employees into arguments and discussions, it turns into direct conflict between employees

Conclusions

Ultimately, the management of a dairy operation needs to be able to determine the motivation not only of workers who harvest milk, but also of workers across the entire business. Taking into account these key factors and exercising them on a daily basis will help assure milk harvesters are the most motivated possible.

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