

Dairy Farm Employee Management: New Employee Orientation

You only get one chance to make a good first impression. Employee orientation is the employer's opportunity to make good first impressions on the new employee that set the tone for the employment relationship. Unfortunately, some dairy producers neglect this vital step.

Orientation and training is of particular importance on the dairy farm. While training is an ongoing process that continues throughout employment, the orientation phase begins with the first day on the job and is generally completed within the first week or so of employment. Another article in my Dairy Farm Employee Management series provided tips and guidelines for getting the new farm employee off to a good start on the first day of employment. (See "Getting the New Employee Off to a Good Start on Day One"). That first day on the job will fly by quickly. The smart employer will have a plan in place for orientation and training. This article outlines the purposes and key components of an employee orientation program.

Purposes of Farm Employee Orientation

Employee orientation helps employees become socialized to the dairy farm. This process of socialization reduces a new employee's natural anxiety that comes with starting any new job. A new employee who becomes comfortable in the workplace is more likely to develop and maintain a positive attitude toward the job and the employer. That positive attitude translates into earlier and higher productivity. When the new worker is assisted in becoming quickly familiar with the work environment, the stress level decreases and the individual is better able to learn new job duties, skills and expectations. This socialization aspect of employee orientation prepares a new worker for job training. If a new employee is relieved of general stress and worry, that individual is able to concentrate and absorb substantive information about new job assignments and tasks.

Planning and Content of Orientation Program

If your dairy farm has not previously conducted an employee orientation program, planning may seem overwhelming. One way to think about orientation is to sit down with current employees and ask for input. Ask what they wish they had been told when they first started working in a dairy operation. Find out what they view as important information for newcomers. Every dairy farm is different, but some possible content areas to consider include the following:

Background and Overview of Your Farm: Provide new employees with your farm's story – the history and development of the dairy business. This includes information about key people in your dairy's history as well as present-day leadership. Share your farm's mission statement, goals and objectives. While a dairy farm tour may have been part of the pre-employment process, this should be repeated, perhaps over a series of days as the new employee is introduced to the

layout of facilities and operations. Throughout the process, emphasize the vital role of employees in the dairy's success.

Employee Policies: Even the smallest farm should consider development of an employee handbook or policy document. (See "Do We Need an Employee Handbook?" in the Dairy Farm Employee Management series). All key policies, compensation and benefits information should be reviewed with the new worker. Do not just present the new employee stacks of documents to read. Orientation is the employer's opportunity to review policies, explain rationale and provide opportunities for questions or clarification.

Introductions: While the new employee may have been introduced to some individuals during the pre-employment process, introductions should be repeated. Name badges (or embroidered shirts/apparel) can be very helpful on the dairy. Provide the new employee with an organizational chart or list of names. Include names of people who visit the farm on a regular basis such as drivers, veterinarians, suppliers, service personnel, neighbors or relatives.

Job Duty Information: While a position description was most likely discussed during the employment process, this is a key part of the new employee orientation phase. Provide the written position description, and use it as a guide to discuss specific tasks including training that will be provided to the new employee. Emphasize basic safety and indicate the importance of ongoing safety training and awareness. Help a new employee to understand the relationship and importance of the position to other jobs and functions on the dairy.

Dairy Farm Job Mentors: On the dairy farm, a number of positions are frequently considered as entry level—such as milkers, pushers, feeders and calf care employees. Frequently, such employees are new to the dairy industry. Your orientation plans should include the assignment of a mentor with special responsibility to guide the new worker in the early days and weeks. New dairy employees need particular guidance in the concepts of sanitation, biosecurity and routine in milking and handling procedures. For example, a new employee working as a pusher may not understand the importance of moving cows in a calm, quiet manner so that they are not agitated, impacting production and cow health.

Who Should Conduct New Employee Orientation?

To assure a consistent message to new employees, it is useful to have the same person conduct orientation. However, identifying supervisors or more experienced co-workers to participate in the process – perhaps as a key mentor – will assist in the socialization aspect of orientation. All members of the orientation team should be those who will share a positive attitude with the new employee. The new worker needs to hear constructive, upbeat messages geared toward making those good, early impressions.

A well-planned orientation program takes an investment of time and effort on the part of the dairy producer. Providing a positive orientation experience during the early days of employment sets the stage for a satisfying, long-term employment relationship on your farm.

As always, feel free to contact me with any of your dairy farm employee management questions.