

Tips for meaningful changes in dairy safety

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“Often what looks like resistance is a lack of clarity.” This is one of the observations in the book *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*, written by Chip Heath and Dan Heath.

Walt Cooley, editor of *Progressive Dairyman*, challenged me to read this book and apply it to safety management programs on dairies.

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To make a change, somebody somewhere needs to do things differently. The authors say that a three-pronged approach is necessary for change, one that involves the rational and emotional parts of our brains plus another component that considers the environment in which we operate.

The authors use an analogy to describe the emotional and rational components of our brains. Picture yourself perched on top of an elephant, holding the reins in the hopes of directing the elephant.

Although you may make a rational decision about where to go, a strong, powerful elephant will not be easily dissuaded from its path if it decides to go in another direction. The rider represents the rational side of the brain in this analogy, whereas the elephant represents the emotional side of the brain.

In order to create change in yourself or others, you need to provide direction to the “rider” and motivate the “elephant.” Next, shape the “path” (environment) for the elephant to ease the way to making a change.

A clear direction for your safety program

The first step in implementing a safety management program is to provide clear direction for your employees so they will be in agreement with the safety program and actively participate in it. Do your employees understand how to do their jobs properly without injuring themselves?

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Research has shown up to 30 percent of livestock-handling injuries occur to those who have been on the job less than six months, and 85 percent of dairy parlor workers have been kicked by a cow. These are alarming statistics, but the solution to this problem is likely close at hand.

“Look for the bright spots,” the authors of *Switch* advise. Investigate what is working and replicate those effective practices throughout your dairy. If 85 percent of dairy parlor workers have been kicked by a cow, this means 15 percent have somehow avoided being kicked by a cow.

What are the animal-handling lessons these workers could be sharing with the others? Do you have someone who has an outstanding safety record on your dairy? Pair your new hires with this experienced employee so this insider knowledge can be shared.

Scripting the critical moves

Let’s face it; safety advice can be bewildering.

Can you name the three top policies or practices that would improve safety on your farm? Creating safety policies for your employees to follow eliminates much of the guesswork regarding safety.

Safety needs vary from farm to farm but can be uncovered through an analysis of your injury data (e.g., workers compensation data) and by consulting with an expert in occupational health and safety.

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Additionally, one of the most effective mechanisms to identify safety issues and generate solutions is to engage workers in the problem-solving process.

Nationwide, “transportation incidents” lead to the most fatalities on dairy farms, according to data compiled from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This includes tractor roll-overs, being struck by a vehicle, flipping ATVs, etc.

“Contact with objects and equipment” is the second- leading cause of fatalities. This could include being crushed by gates, struck by parlor equipment, getting caught in a PTO, etc. Up to one-third of injuries on farms are said to be related to livestock handling.

Here are some examples of “critical moves” that could help your dairy farm.

- *Visibility vests for all employees*— Wearing a visibility vest can help with preventing a wide variety of incidents. Think of how often you work in conditions that reduce visibility, such as working before dawn or working on a cloudy day.
High-visibility items improve the ability of others to see you in sunny conditions also. Consider when you are hunched over, unbaling hay to prepare a feed ration. Even the best drivers may have difficulty noticing someone in this position; a high-visibility vest can help.
- *Identify “keep out” areas such as the feed area*— The feed area in your farm is a hazardous area. When a feed ration is being prepared, the tractor is moving back and forth between the grain bins and the mixer-loader. The chances of running over a pedestrian in this area are high.
Make it a policy on your farm that no pedestrians are allowed in the grain bin area. Post a sign in English and Spanish, and with a pictogram, to communicate your policy. Another area where this policy should be implemented is near the silage face, which is prone to collapsing.
- *Audio warning system for collisions*— There can be many blind spots in heavy equipment, leading to unintentional damage by backing into gates, feedbunks and sometimes people.
This was the motivation for Twilla Tracy, runner-up in the 2011 Texas Cattle Feeders Association Best Safety Practices Contest, who implemented an audio warning system at her workplace.

As drivers back up to an object, a warning system will beep louder and more frequently as the tractor approaches the object. The \$300 installation cost is small in comparison to the potential cost of repairing a broken gate.
- *Three points of contact for ladder injuries*— I heard of one dairy worker who always faced outwards while going down the ladder of the mixer-loader. When he neared the bottom rung, he would jump down.

This worked for a while, until one day he twisted his ankle. The ladder safety rule? Always maintain three points of contact (e.g., two hands and one foot) as you ascend and descend ladders.

Motivating the elephant in ourselves and our employees

I remember the first time I witnessed a grain dust explosion. Being in the safety world, I had heard how a little dust can lead to a huge explosion when exposed to a flame. The controlled demonstration had a huge impact on my understanding of how explosions occur – despite having already received classroom lessons on its dangers.

During safety meetings on your dairies, be sure to explain why safety policies are important to each person's health and well-being. Interactive demonstrations can have a high impact.

A new curriculum developed by the Migrant Clinicians Network, the National Farm Medicine Center and the Upper Midwest Center for Agricultural Safety and Health provides ready-to-use interactive lessons in English and Spanish to stimulate discussion on why it is important to work safely on the job, how to identify safety needs and how to control hazards.

Visit the [website](#) to download this curriculum. Corresponding flip charts or PowerPoint versions can be provided by completing the online order form.

Shaping the path

“What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem.” What can you do to make your work environment safer for your employees?

Purchases of modern equipment typically have safety controls put in place to “engineer out” the danger. For example, modern tractor cabs are built to withstand the weight of a tractor during a rollover, thus protecting the driver from being crushed.

Are you keeping up with basic housekeeping on your dairy? Throw out frayed electrical cords, repair gates that have metal parts sticking out and keep your machinery in good repair.

Part of creating a safe environment is to build habits that enhance farm safety. The authors of *Switch* advise that such a habit should advance the mission and be easy to embrace by workers. My grandfather made a habit of asking his dairy parlor workers every single day how things were going.

It was a broad question, but he found it was one of his most effective management practices that led to the identification of multiple issues that needed to be addressed to improve dairy operations. Are you asking about safety? You will be surprised by what you learn. **PD**

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ILLUSTRATION: *Illustration by Fredric Ridenour.*

