

Safety management: Employee participation and accountability

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In the previous *Progressive Dairyman* [safety article](#), we discussed the importance of owner and management commitment to an on-farm safety program. The article communicated that it is imperative that owners and managers become involved and participate in a safety program.

However, modern dairy farms are growing in size, and this necessitates the owner and manager to delegate important tasks and responsibilities to a growing number of employees. Where many expanding business owners struggle is in the involvement of workers in a safety process by delegating safety responsibilities to workers, as well as establishing safety accountability among workers.

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Employee participation

A second tenet (in addition to owner and management commitment) of any successful dairy farm safety program is to ensure worker participation in the safety program. Dairy workers are the first line of defense against safety concerns on a farm. They are on the front lines, and they witness more safety offenses and violations than even their managers can catch. Since workers are often those closest to the hazards and have the most firsthand knowledge of workplace hazards, they also often have the best ideas for improving safety.

Employee participation means that workers are encouraged to participate in the safety program. Clearly, the employer has ultimate responsibility for its workers; however, using employees' knowledge, observations and experience to help identify and resolve problems can make the system more effective. Examples of how dairy workers can be included in the safety program include:

- Incident investigations
- Procedure development
- Development and implementation of safety and health training
- Job safety analysis
- Safety and health committee/team involvement
- Recommendations for specific actions in response to employee safety suggestions

- Problem-solving techniques to seek solutions to identified safety and health problems

At a minimum, a mechanism should exist for workers to identify and report safety concerns on the farm without fear of reprisal or punishment. These reported issues should be addressed in a timely fashion, which will communicate to workers that safety is a high priority for owners and managers.

Employee involvement should also be recognized. Recognition encourages employees to use safe work practices and to integrate safety into the fabric of their daily jobs. Involving workers and using safe behavior reinforcement develops a positive approach to managing the safety and health program on a farm.

Accountability

Many on-farm visits and discussions with producers have revealed that many dairy farms lack a clear and understandable structure that makes managers and employees accountable for their work. The fear that individual leadership and accountability will somehow suppress or destroy team effort and worker participation on a farm is groundless. In fact, the opposite is true.

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Ambiguous accountability damages morale and leads workers to seek unacceptable solutions instead of effective business solutions. Accountability is a fundamental principle of business success and must be designed into the management structure. When accountability is clear, productivity and efficiency follow. Accountability should be the aim of all good managers and successful dairy farms. Holding managers and workers accountable for safety performance is no exception.

Accountability may be defined as an activity, practice or issue for which a person(s) can legitimately be held responsible and called on to justify or change. In a workplace, there are three types of accountability: personal accountability, peer accountability and management accountability. In an ideal environment, each party can and should hold each other accountable. Accountability is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility that managers should embrace. It goes beyond performing the tasks assigned to given roles and involves ensuring that everyone is also performing those roles safely. In a workplace with high safety accountability, employees and managers are more vigilant in seeking opportunities to improve processes in order to increase safety.

Below are some recommendations for holding a dairy farm workforce more accountable for safety performance.

Create an environment for safety

Accountability for safety requires an environment where workers want to be safe because it is the right thing to do. The process begins with ownership and management, which must focus on actions, not just words. Workers observe and emulate their supervisors. Therefore dairy managers must not create an impression of "do as I say, not as I do," but rather "do as I say *and* as I do."

Accountability is also a fundamental aspect of professionalism and effective performance on the job. Professionalism refers to doing one's job and being accountable for the workplace. This leads to effective decision-making and is the foundation of a productive work environment.

Demonstrate commitment

Dairy farms need to not only have safety policies in place, but should also consider implementing a zero-tolerance policy for violations. Owners must create a system of accountability for safety that includes:

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- Strong policy
- Documentation
- Training and communication
- Accountability to follow through with safety rules

Organizations that demonstrate strong baseline safety programs led by middle managers or supervisors and worker participation frequently see a direct result in the form of fewer injuries, reduced hazards, lower costs and higher productivity.

Focus on middle managers

On most large-herd dairy operations, middle managers are responsible for the day-to-day operations of their units. This includes responsibility for creating and sustaining a culture of safety. If a middle manager allows employees to bypass or overlook safety rules, there may be a higher rate of injury or unsafe behavior. If the middle manager fails to implement a formal system to enforce a safety program or fails to address those who violate safety rules, workers may be more likely to take shortcuts that undermine safety.

Therefore, to be successful, any safety program must include full buy-in and participation of all middle managers. The program should make adhering to safety practices a natural course of performing tasks. The program should not only address unsafe employee behaviors and actions, but also the actions of middle managers who fail to embrace and enforce the spirit and letter of the safety program policies.

Give managers authority

If middle managers are to be held accountable for their units, they need to be granted an appropriate level of authority. Middle managers must be given authority to address recognized safety hazards in a timely fashion when they are reported. With accountability for safety must come authority, so that middle managers can take action to improve how their units function.

Measure safety

A common phrase in business is “What can be measured can be managed.” Safety is no exception. Dairy farms should support accountability-driven leadership built on strong, reliable loss trend data so that the rate and severity of worker injuries can be measured. From this data, the organization should set goals, and all managers and workers should be responsible for meeting these goals. Middle managers are positioned well to drive cultural change. Therefore, they should be provided with data on dairy tasks in their respective units and given responsibility for ensuring continued performance in safety.

For example, dairy farm injury research indicates that high percentages of employee injury occur during livestock handling activities, or inside the milking parlor. With that in mind, managers and employees should be reminded of this reality and receive proper training in animal handling to ensure that they can be held accountable for performing these tasks as safely as possible. Proper training in animal handling does not end by telling employees to watch out for these big animals because they can cause injury.

Proper training in animal handling refers to actually spending time with new employees who may have no experience working with cows, to show them how cows respond to human stimuli. This includes how a worker can facilitate cow movement without yelling or excessive gesturing. Many of the issues we see in the infamous animal abuse videos refer back to employees who simply do not understand animal behavior and become frustrated. Proper animal handling training, retraining and reinforcement with your employees can lead to better comprehension, which enables workers to make correct decisions in high-pressure situations.

Encourage safety-minded decision

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing; the next best thing is the wrong thing; and the worst thing you can do is nothing.” On dairy farms, workers generally do not have the option to do nothing. However, there are usually several ways to complete a task, so workers must quickly decide which way is best. In high-pressure situations, especially involving large animals, the choice too often comes down to “just do it.” This removes accountability because the primary concern is speed. When workers are trained to identify the safest solution, and are held accountable for doing so, good decisions become part of their natural course when performing dairy tasks.

Safety management training

A new initiative involving multiple entities seeks to address safety management and leadership on U.S. dairy farms. Researchers at the High Plains and Intermountain Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (HICAHS), located at Colorado State University, have partnered with the dairy extensions in several states to begin the process of developing a safety management and leadership training program for dairy owners, managers and supervisors.

As part of the development of the training curricula, we are soliciting feedback from dairy owners and managers regarding the safety management needs on dairy farms. We have prepared a short questionnaire for readers of *Progressive Dairyman* to complete. The questionnaire is confidential, <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/hcqjZy>

and allows the owner or manager the opportunity to express their willingness to participate in future developed trainings, which will be made available free of charge. We would appreciate your help in helping us develop this training for dairy producers. The [questionnaire can be found here](#).

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