

Who Has the Biggest Impact on Training Employees How to Milk?

Dr. Ronald Erskine

Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences
College of Veterinary Medicine
Michigan State University



Although routine, milking cows on a dairy farm is one of the most critical jobs that gets done every day and has an impact on the health and productivity of the cows, and thus the bottom line for a dairy farm. From decades of education and research, and a lifetime of experience, most dairy producers know the essential milking practices to reduce mastitis and optimize milk harvest.

However, the labor landscape is rapidly changing on many dairy herds; farm size and the size of the labor force are both increasing. Whether the labor is essentially supplied by family members or non-family labor, increased complexity of management practices demands good communication and understanding of protocols by all team members to achieve quality milk. If English isn't the primary language of the employees, this adds an additional barrier to effective milking. Additionally, fewer employees are from an agricultural background and may have little dairy experience when seeking employment on a farm. Given the importance of milking practices, every farm should have milking protocols and every person who milks should know and practice those protocols.

If the owners/managers milk the cows, the line of communication to ensure good milking proficiency is short. But what if employees help milk the cows, or are entirely responsible for milking the cows?

The Three A's

Good training then becomes essential, and needs to **Accurately** represent the protocols, **Assure** that employees understand what they need to do, and both the employees and the trainer have to be **Accountable** to maintain the training. In order for this to happen, farm management must clearly demonstrate the importance of training to the employees.

If the farm management doesn't participate in training, only offers minimal training, or doesn't follow-up on training, this will likely result in milking protocols that are best for the milkers and not for the cows. Given the importance of milking protocols and training, who might be having the biggest impact on employees who milk the cows? A preliminary study from 12 Michigan dairy farms suggests that in some cases, it may not be the farm management.

As part of our pilot study for the QMA project (December – May, 2014), we asked dairy producers and/or farm managers a series of questions regarding milk quality goals, training of employees for milking, and communication between farm personnel. Afterwards, we asked the employees who were involved with milking, mastitis therapy (including dry cow therapy), and in some cases, cow environment, the same questions.

In order to promote honest, unbiased answers, we used a computer-assisted slide show with 'clickers' (Turning Point Technologies) to ensure that employee responses were anonymous. A total of 42 English-speaking and 39 Spanish-speaking employees participated in our sessions, with an average of about seven employees on each farm.

Only 29% of employees stated they learned how to milk from the managers or owners, 64% said from the other milkers, and 7% they just "learned on the job" with little or no training. (Table 1). If the employees were further divided into Spanish-speaking and English-speaking, only 13% of Latino workers said they learned the milking protocols from managers or owners. If the employee doing the training is following the protocols, then maybe the new employee will be well-trained. However, we have been in parlors where not only do employees on different shifts use different protocols, but we have even watched employees on the same shift use different protocols.

Monitoring procedures of employees in all shifts is an essential aspect of managing. Additionally, 77% of all employees stated there were no regular team meetings to talk over or improve protocols or if meetings occurred, they only happened when there was a problem.

This suggests that training on many farms is not producing the effect that many dairy producers would like and may explain the frequent problem of protocol drift. We like to recommend that you tell employees how and why to do it, that you show them how to do it, then you have them tell you and then have them show you.

Effective training is one of the foundations of employee management and quality milk.

Questions that every dairy producer needs to ask themselves are:

1. Do I have a standard milking protocol?
2. Do I have a training protocol for employees?
3. Do I review training protocols and compliance?
4. Do my employees know understand why the steps in the protocol are important?

A Michigan State University Extension survey, conducted through telephone interviews with 158 dairy employees, found that employees overwhelmingly want to go beyond just how to do things. They also want to know why they do things. Translation: they want to be educated about what they do on the farm.

Surprised? The desire of employees to learn ranked 4.73 on a 5 point scale (a score of “5” was “I am interested in dairy and want to learn more”; a score of “1” was “I already know enough to do my job”).

Taking the time and effort to inform and train employees on milking and cow care protocols will not only engage everyone on the farm towards a team mindset but also pay dividends in the quality and harvest of milk as well.

Table 1- Who Usually Trains the Milkers on Your Farm?

| | Owners/Managers (n=17) | English – speaking employees (n=42) | Spanish-speaking employees (n=39) |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Response to Question | % of Responses | % of Response | % of Responses |
| Mangers/Owners train employees | 59 | 42 | 13 |
| Other milkers train employees | 41 | 51 | 81 |
| Employees just learn “on the job” with no training | 0 | 7 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 100 | 100 | 100 |