To keep good help, learn to ‘speak their language’

BY KARA LYNN DUNN

Good help can be hard to find — even harder to keep. Now, a New York Farm Viability Institute-funded project with the Cornell Farmworker Program is improving the odds of both — helping to retain dairy workers and avoiding retraining costs via improved communications. It comes down to speaking your workers’ language — be it English or another.

Jerry Dell Farms at Dryden, N.Y., is proof of the value of enhancing communications with farm employees. Sue and Vaughn Sherman operate the certified organic dairy operation with 700 milking cows, 700 young stock and 17 employees spread over three farms. For seven workers, Spanish is their native language.

“Using a new [CFP] evaluation system of bilingual forms with a grading system lets our workers know in their own language how well they are doing with their responsibilities,” explains Sue. “It has proven valuable, particularly with our Hispanic workers.”

“Building better communication processes improves the quality of life on the farm for both owners and employees,” confirms CFP Director Mary Jo Dudley. “It fosters a better working environment; creates a satisfied, more productive and stable workforce; and reduces the stress and cost of training new employees.”

Built on focus group interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of on-farm communication challenges and opportunities, Dudley conducted 23 focus groups with 125 farmworkers and 29 farm owner/manager interviews. “We wanted to develop communication and evaluation tools that resonate well with workers as well as employers, and incorporate culturally-based values. For example, many Hispanic workers like to be recognized for always arriving on time for work and staying until a job is completed even if their shift is over,” she points out.

For Spanish-speaking workers, talking with CFP bilingual staff helps them understand on-farm matters in terms of language, literacy and cultural focus. Dudley says one example is “learning what FICA represents in one’s paycheck and that it is not a deduction for housing.”

Those conversations also helped prepare workers to raise both suggestions and concerns with farm owners. In one instance, a farm adjusted its scheduling rotation to reduce swing shift fatigue. Others developed visual depictions of standard operating procedures.

CFP bilingual resources include production charts, a sample work contract, a paycheck with standard deductions identified and a housing maintenance checklist. Together, they boost communication efficiency.

The Shermans use templates with numerical scale or “satisfactory, unsatisfactory” indicators for different job responsibilities. They meet with workers as needed or about three times a year.

“My husband and I speak very little Spanish,” notes Sue. “So, having the CFP staff who understand farming and are fluent in our employees’ native language provides workers enough comfort that they feel freer to ask questions. That has helped things run very smoothly.

“Before this project our workers did not want to bother us with things like a leaky faucet in their housing. Now they understand how important it is to tell us so we can fix them.”

As a direct result of farmer/worker engagement, seven farms participating in the NYFVI-funded project during 2012-13 invested a total of $12,500 in employee housing improvements. Those improvements included household appliance repair/replacement, door locks, furniture replacement, new carpet and pest control.

Dudley is authoring a “Building an Effective Work Team on Your Dairy Farm” guidebook. It’s designed to help start workplace dialogues and communication about everything from performance and workplace safety to off-farm social life.

Value to dairy farms

“This project has helped participating farms stabilize their workforce and avoid expenses and production losses due to employee turnover. Those expenses and losses (based on a 10% turnover) are estimated at $468,750 to $562,500,” says NYFVI Executive Director David Grusenmeyer.

With a new $100,000 grant to help additional farms, Dudley and her staff work one-on-one to customize template forms or build unique evaluation forms for specific farm needs. Contact her at 607-254-5194, farmworkers@cornell.edu.

Dunn writes from Mannsville, N.Y.

Employee turnover has a high cost

Dairy financial consultants have long been aware of the cost of poor employer-employee communications. It drives labor costs up and herd production down. By improving workplace environments, farms reduce expenses related to employee turnover such as recruiting, interviewing, training, and payments for vacation and bonuses for departing employees, points out Mary Jo Dudley. Worker turnover causes significant production losses from:

- time required for new employees to learn the job
- extended work shifts for continuing employees, while training new workers
- worker fatigue

A Michigan State Extension study tags somewhat shocking dairy employee turnover costs to time involved, out-of-pocket costs and lower productivity. Conservatively use 100% to 150% of salary for hourly workers and 200% to 250% of management position salaries.

For example if an employee is earning $10 to $12 per hour, turnover would be an estimated $37,500 to $45,000 (at 150%). For a dairy farm with 20 employees and 10% turnover per year, the cost would be $75,000 to $90,000 per year.

Key Points

- Better communications saved over $468,750 on 29 dairy farms.
- CFP’s bilingual materials help this employer relate with employees.
- Guidebook was developed especially for dairy farm teams.

CFP dairy project highlights

The project tackles three key priorities:

- Helps employers and employees establish effective on-farm communications
- Helps farm owners retain or transition to a Spanish-speaking workforce while maintaining high quality milking and animal care
- Helps farmworkers better understand how performance is evaluated and learn about opportunities for training, advancement and pay increases not based on annual anniversaries alone

CFP dairy project highlights

Bridging the Cultural Gap: Sue Sherman found that using CFP bilingual forms proved very valuable at Jerry Dell Farms.

NYFVI is a farmer-led nonprofit dedicated to helping New York farms become more profitable. Its competitive grant program connects farmer-identified needs to practical research and education solutions for positive farm-level impact. More details at nyfvi.org.