

## Training the Feed Delivery Team

Travis Thayer, DVM  
Diamond V

Email: [tthayer@diamonddv.com](mailto:tthayer@diamonddv.com)

### INTRODUCTION

We have all seen well-formulated rations fall short of optimal effectiveness due to less than optimal mixing, delivery, and feed bunk management. Properly trained, engaged, and conscientious employees are key to decreasing the gap between the ration on paper and the ration that the cow actually eats. Much of the time in my employee training role at Diamond V is spent on feeder training. This is sometimes in a group setting with multiple dairies attending, so the subject matter follows a more general format, but training is often at an individual dairy after a Diamond V Team Member has done a TMR Audit<sup>®</sup> on farm and identified opportunities for improvement in the feeding process, which then enables us to tailor the training to more strongly emphasize those areas needing more attention to detail. The training is delivered in Spanish or English (or both) depending on the background of the employees attending the session. Time constraints often dictate the format of interaction and delivery of information. In more limited time situations, or when the meeting is held at an off-farm location, such as a restaurant or meeting hall, interactions with employees are in a classroom format, incorporating pictures and video to illustrate comments. On farm, if time allows, in addition to a 45-60 min classroom presentation, it is helpful if I am able to observe and interact with employees before the meeting (e.g., observing mixing and then riding in the tractor with employees while they deliver feed). This allows me to familiarize myself with employee personalities and specific challenges that individuals may be encountering and helps direct me in points of emphasis. If feasible, doing a group walkthrough of the facilities and inspection of the mixer wagon after the classroom portion helps to reinforce concepts in a kinesthetic manner.

### THE BIG PICTURE

We start out by emphasizing 4 main themes for employees to consider: **safety, accuracy, consistency, and communication**. These themes recur throughout the presentation; bringing specific

attention to them up front helps set the stage for better retention.

The first step is to explain to feed delivery teams how crucial their job is to success in every aspect of the dairy (health, milk production, reproduction, etc.). We begin by discussing basic ruminant anatomy and physiology, followed by a general discussion of the wide-ranging effects of nutrition on animal health and performance. This helps to engage employees up front and garners their attention for the more detail-oriented aspects of the training session. No matter what one's ethnic or social background, it is much more effective to start with *why* before going into the *what* and *how*. If someone is given a protocol to follow and they don't thoroughly understand why, protocol drift is much more likely to occur, especially in the more tedious or demanding aspects of the job.

### PROVIDE CLARITY

Employee management is one of the most challenging aspects of running any business. In agriculture, this is compounded, in part due to the jobs themselves (long hours, dangerous or harsh conditions, hard physical work, etc.), but also by increasing immigration enforcement pressure, since the majority of agricultural employees in our country are immigrants of Hispanic origin. With increasing immigration enforcement, employee retention is more important than ever.

#### Lack of Clarity

Most employees take pride in their work and want to do a good job. However, if we have not defined our expectations of what a *good* job is, or effectively communicated job responsibilities, work flow, etc., then we are setting employees up for failure, and ourselves up for disappointment. I have sat many times with frustrated dairy managers and owners who make the statement, "They should just know that this is important" or "This is so obvious." Upon further questioning (usually of both employee and owner), often I find that expectations have not been communicated clearly. One key point to

remember is that just because something seems obvious and *common sense* to us, we can't assume

that it is for the employee, especially if they have not worked in agriculture previously.

## **GENERAL OUTLINE OF DIAMOND V'S TRAINING CURRICULUM:**

**Note that safety is heavily emphasized throughout**

- 1. Big picture: safety, accuracy, consistency, communication**
- 2. Anatomy/physiology of the cow/effect of nutrition on health**
- 3. Silage management – Important aspects and goals of good silage management**
  - Mechanism and consequences of heating and spoilage
  - Proper face management
  - Plastic and tire management
  - Use and removal (central pile, don't leave loose silage between feedings, etc. – the *why* behind all of these aspects)
  - Strong emphasis on safety
- 4. Feed center/inventory management/TMR mixing –**
  - Basics of commodity management:
    - Examples (pics and video) of both good and bad examples of commodity management
    - Discussion on expense of feed costs and importance of reducing shrink
    - Importance of rotating feed ingredients (first in first out)
  - Feed center organization for optimum efficiency
  - What is a TMR and what is the purpose, and how does this work with rumen physiology
  - Discussion of ingredients (protein, energy, forages) that go into a TMR
  - Basics of TMR mixing and loading
    - Proper mixer loading (load in center, general order of ingredients, etc.)
    - Multiple videos and graphical demonstration of concepts
- 5. TMR delivery and feed bunk management:**
  - Graphical and video examples shown as with other modules
  - Coordination of feed delivery with other tasks (milking, cleaning free stalls, corrals, etc.)
  - Examples of good and bad feed delivery (uneven feed delivery, feed all along the bunk, etc.)
  - Pushing up feed – importance of regular feed pushups - discussion of sorting
  - Importance of consistent feed delivery
  - Feed bunk management – reading bunks and making adjustments – key points and watch-outs - general concepts or farm specific depending on the situation
  - Importance of precision via a discussion on refusals, with emphasis on cost of feed and reducing shrink/wastage
- 6. Mixer maintenance**
  - Common maintenance issues to watch out for (kicker plates, blades, etc.)
  - Proper mixing action
  - Examples of errors – twine wrapped around screws, blades dull, kicker plates worn, etc. (video and photo examples)
  - Load cell accuracy
- 7. Workplace safety**
  - Silage dangers
  - Reducing or avoiding backing up
  - Maintaining safe lines of site in work areas
  - Heavy equipment safety
  - Being vigilant for visitors and other employees who may not recognize hazards of feeding areas and equipment

## Job Descriptions

Job descriptions are a great way to provide clarity for employees. Many positions on the farm involve a variety of responsibilities, and it is easy to have things slip through the cracks when an employee does not realize that something is their job. Job descriptions are also useful during the hiring process to let employees know what they are getting into up front. Penn State University Extension has a useful online tool, specific to dairies, the [Job Description Generator](#). It contains templates for a variety of job classifications on dairies that can then be customized to fit your farm. Job descriptions as created are in English, so translation into Spanish (use a real person, not online translators - the investment is worth it - online translators do not produce the true meaning of what needs to be said or done) would be needed.

### Diamond V Feeder Job Description Template

Unfortunately, while the job description generator is a useful tool to get started with the process, the feeding tasks job description lacks enough detail to fully describe the breadth of tasks that a feeder has to complete every day. Diamond V Technical Service Specialist Dr. Tom Oelberg recently collaborated with teammates Dr. Sam Mosley and David Greene to put together a detailed template for a feeder job description (provided in English at the end of this document - it is available in Spanish also) that covers the job in much more detail. This document can be obtained by contacting any Diamond V Ruminant Team member, or by contacting Diamond V HQ at 1-800-373-7234.

### Protocols/Standard Operating Procedures

Once an employee knows what his or her job responsibilities are, the next question is, "How do I do them?" This is where protocols or standard operating procedures (**SOP**) for specific tasks come into play. Protocols should be as simple as possible, written in plain language with as little unnecessary jargon as possible, readily accessible to employees and/or posted in a prominent place, and written in employees' predominant native language. Consistency is key on the dairy, and having *usable*

protocols that every shift follows helps immensely toward achieving more consistent results. *Usable* means - accessible, simple, clear, understandable, and current. It does not mean - in a binder in English in the main office, or sitting in an old, dusty, manure covered three ring binder with sheets dated 5 yr ago! Keep in mind also that it is usually necessary to provide some hands on training to ensure the employee develops good habits and learns things the *right* way the first time around.

### Provide Feedback

After onboarding and employee training, it is important to provide regular feedback to employees about their performance. Many dairies and their nutritionists use feed management software reports and metrics to provide feedback to employees. This is a great, objective way to show employees how they are doing.

Other modes of feedback include employee performance reviews, regular employee meetings, or just an occasional walkthrough, whether by a dairy owner or employee, a nutritionist, veterinarian or associated staff, or an allied industry consultant. The most important part is that feedback be clear, constructive and timely.

## RESOURCES

Penn State Extension Dairy Team Job Description Generator. Accessed July 18, 2016. <http://www.ahg.com:8180/PSUJobDescription/>

Gingrich II, K. Fred. 2011. Why treatment protocols are so important. Hoard's Dairyman. Accessed July 18, 2016. [http://www.hoards.com/E\\_animalhealth/aabp6](http://www.hoards.com/E_animalhealth/aabp6)

Missouri Dairy Resource Guide. Accessed July 18, 2016. <http://dairy.missouri.edu/index.htm>

Thayer, Travis. 2016. Clarity and Fairness: Key Factors in Employee Satisfaction. Accessed July 18, 2016. <http://bit.ly/2asX9MS>