



This is the first article in a series about training and developing dairy husbandry, business and people management skills.

Key to successfully managing any large herd are people – the team that comprises staff who milk, feed, rear calves or, indeed, manage other staff. And as the proportion of herds that keep more than 120 cows increases, team building becomes more of an issue.

Suffolk-based herd manager Chris Hodge knows the importance of leading and motivating a team of staff first hand. He manages a 210-cow herd at Rushcove Farm, near Lowestoft, which is part of a dairy business partnership with a neighbouring farm, where two smaller herds have been combined into one larger herd to take advantage of some economies of scale.

“It was the only way to do the job properly and to be profitable,” he says. “And having a good team of staff in place to manage this larger was pivotal to the business plan.”

New Zealand born Chris has worked on dairy units across the world, in countries including Zimbabwe, Israel, Switzerland, New Zealand and Australia. He’s also spent 10 years living and working in the UK, first on dairy units in Shropshire before joining agricultural recruitment experts LKL Services four years ago and moving to Suffolk.

“Working on different kinds of dairy units all over the world, and also being managed myself by other people, means that I have a lot of experience and skills to draw upon. And although the cows, climate and systems may be different in each country, I have found that managing people is pretty much the same. Good communication and keeping them motivated is the key.”

Chris manages a team of three people, including two Poles, at Rushcove, comprising a relief milker cum stockman, a tractor driver cum stockman, and another man who is charged with feeding the cows.

Valuable asset

“Chris’ leadership and management skills are vital to the success of the herd. The most valuable asset here at the unit is



Top team, from left to right: Chris Hodge, Stan Szwedek and Shane Bellis

How can large herd managers ensure that they build, retain and motivate the team of people who work hard every day to ensure that the dairy business is a success? We spoke to a herd manager and a leading dairy labour supplier to find out more.

the team and he recognises that fact,” says LKL’s George Gordon.

He adds that Chris’ key role is to lead and motivate the staff, to communicate clearly and efficiently and to ‘build’ the team – just like any other manager.

“And employee numbers are not an indication of the importance of having those skills and roles within a business. Even on a one-person unit, there are still many people in your ‘team’, such as the vet, the nutritionist and the consultant. So leadership and communication skills are just as relevant.”

To help managers develop new and hone existing skills, George’s company runs a three-day course for ‘head men’. It aims

to equip them with skills in key areas such as team building, motivation, people management and leadership. “And a lot of time is also spent on developing good communication skills – that’s crucial,” he says.

All too often a herds person is given the job of managing a large herd due to his considerable success in managing a small or medium-sized unit. “And they may be fantastic at ensuring that calving intervals are tight, keeping somatic cell counts in check and meeting other herd performance criteria,” says George.

“But that doesn’t mean that they’ll be good at – or enjoy – managing a team of people, as is often required when looking

after a large herd. Managing cows and managing people are two completely different things and require different sets of skills to deal with problems. And managing people can be a daunting prospect when you’ve no previous experience. “That’s one of the reasons why we run this course for people managing large herds.”

The course is spread over a three-month period and has been designed for herd managers who need to achieve results through people. It’s run by an ex herd manager, which George says is vital as it gives the course and its content considerable credibility as well as allowing the tutor to relate to their students and the problems they face on a day-to-day basis.

“The process involves using herd managers’ experience and knowledge to develop discussion and explore topics. Some exercises will be used during the courses to test the application of topics covered and the outcomes will be

Scheme launched to train large herd managers

January 2009 saw the launch of Dairy Manager Scheme (DMS) – a training organisation working on behalf of its member businesses to recruit high calibre individuals and develop them into talented and well-trained large dairy herd managers for the future. The scheme, developed by Kite Consulting and Marden Management, is set to recruit high potential young people with enthusiasm and ambition and provide them with a two-year training programme designed to cover all the disciplines involved with the management of large dairy herds.

“It’s an unrivalled training scheme of its type in the UK and it’s an opportunity to create a blue print for the industry and encourage people into large dairy herd management,” says Kite’s Sophie Helyer.

Ideal candidates

On completion of the programme, trainees will have a wide overview of the whole industry and a level of experience, knowledge and maturity that will make them ideal candidates for a responsible role in a large dairy herd – something that would not otherwise be expected after two years. “Our aim is to provide our clients with well-trained and experienced dairy herd managers capable of managing

high performance 500+ cow herds within five years,” she adds.

“We are interested in promoting expertise and professionalism in large scale dairy management.”

The two-year training programme combines practical experience with on and off the job training. Successful candidates will be employed by DMS and given four six-month placements on four different farms.

DMS members will also have access to trainees who are keen to accept, and capable of fulfilling, increasingly responsible and challenging positions. DMS will work with its members to match the best person to the job, to ensure the secondments are beneficial for both sides and the scheme will also provide support and guidance throughout the training programme and hold regular review sessions and appraisals.

“Members can benefit from the security, stability and competency guaranteed for a two-year period with good quality members of staff positioned on farm,” says Ms Helyer.

“The scheme also enables members to realise their long-term expansion goals by having a good team around them. And it reduces the stress involved with training new staff, as well as spreading the risk and cost of in-house training.”

reviewed against the work environment. Some project work will also be set between training days to apply theory back in the workplace,” adds George.

Sounding boards

Up to 10 people attend each course and between them the delegates can manage upwards of 1,000 cows. “And we encourage them to exchange contact details so they can discuss issues and problems when they’re back on farm. They can support

and advise each other and use one another as sounding boards.”

The course has been running for the past eight years, predominantly for LKL contractors, but non-contractor delegates have been on the course and are more than welcome, says George.

“I believe that anyone charged with managing people in a dairy business environment would benefit from attending the course. And the benefits should stay with delegates through continued contact with other managers on the course.

“It’s an on-going learning process and we think that this course provides a good grounding in people management and gets team leaders off to a confident start.”

Rachael Porter

Learning how to manage people – not just cows

Power to the people