

Good communication is key to successful staff and dairy business management

# Stop, look and listen

It's not just about managing cows any more. Larger herds with increased labour requirements means that dairying success depends heavily on people management skills. And even one-man bands have a 'team' – including their vet, nutritionist and any relief staff – to co-ordinate. So, what's the secret to successful team management?

text Rachael Porter

Is your staff turnover high or does your herdsman lack motivation? Perhaps your team – comprising employees or otherwise – just isn't gelling and things just aren't moving forward. Well, believe it or not, it's time to take a close look at yourself – and not your employees or support staff.

"At the heart of problems, or indeed success, in managing a team is communication," says LKL's George Gordon. "It's a core element to managing people – be they your own team of staff or people who you contract in to support the herd and business, such as the vet and the nutritionist."

## 'Soft' skills

Sounds obvious but a lot of people get it wrong – they're not good at communicating. Yet the larger the herd and unit and the larger the team, the more important communication becomes – it's vital. And for that reason, some investment in better communication is just as vital as success as investing in cow housing or a new parlour. "The good news is that it's much cheaper – it costs very little or even nothing at all to become a better communicator," says Mr Gordon. "And the really good news is that improving your 'soft' people skills can really pay dividends for your business. The benefits can be huge."

LKL runs a four-day programme for herdsman and herd managers to help develop communication and leadership skills. And this is spread over several months so delegates can go back to their units and apply what they've learnt to practical situations and then come back to discuss how it went and learn from their peers.

Improving and developing your communication skills starts with a self-assessment. How good a communicator are you? "Be honest and identify your good and bad points. Are you really a good listener? Are you assertive, or aggressive or submissive?"

"Once you know that, you can work on listening more and improving your people skills."

Listening really is vital, according to Mr Gordon. "It's a skill that will get you a long way to getting the best from people and also helps aggressive and submissive 'managers' to become more assertive, rather than flying off the handle or avoiding problems and confrontation."

"Everyone assumes that good communication is about talking, but



George Gordon: "Improving 'soft' people skills can pay dividends for your business"



Charles Skelton: "Feed back is important, particularly if it's positive"

really it's about listening and responding appropriately. In other words, it's about being assertive and leading your team in a professional manner. And it's about negotiating solutions to problems on the farm and learning how to give praise and criticism in appropriate ways to your team.

"And it's up to you – the owner, herd manager or herdsman – to lead by example. If you listen to your staff or contractors then they will respond better to you. If you're calm, fair and assertive then people will tend to mirror that behavioural style too. It's a win-win. You ultimately have more chance of getting things done the way you want them done, with the team happy and working to a high standard."

## Personal relationships

If communication is bad, things don't get done, people get frustrated, relationships can become strained and staff leave. "It's all too common. Someone, usually the manager, isn't happy about how something is being done. But rather than deal with it assertively, they behave passively and store up their frustration – until everything comes to a head and results in an uncomfortable confrontation and an aggressive outburst."

"This isn't good for staff moral – or the business. How can things settle and improve if staff come into the team and leave it through a revolving door? What's needed is stability – a solid team with good rapport," says Mr Gordon.

"So think about your style of management and how you come across to other people and try to improve it – it's not hard to make progress."

He says that most units could benefit from better communication: "Even where it's already being done well, things can always be better."

The rewards can also extend into personal relationships, with feedback from those who've attended LKL's

courses saying that their new skills and approach have helped on the domestic front also.

"Farming can be isolating – for whole families and not just the people working every day on the farm. This can have a 'pressure cooker' effect and magnify every little niggle and problem. So listen – and communicate."

## Team building

Promar consultant Charles Skelton agrees – good communication is vital. "It's the basis of good management, but it doesn't always come easily to producers. They may be very good stockmen and excel at managing cows and the business, but managing people is a completely different ball game."

He says that he's often asked for advice on sorting out staff issues and problems that, ultimately, stem from poor communication and team rapport. "And I can sometimes help, but it's really down to the person in charge – be that the owner, manager or herdsman, to take control and lead by example."

"I've worked as a herdsman myself and so I know that good, clear instructions are appreciated. Feed back is important too, particularly if it's positive. A pat on the back costs nothing and can go a long way to boosting moral."

"And remember that communication isn't just verbal. Investing in some white boards and pens can be money well spent – even if they're only used to pass on information to the relief milker about tubed cows or to leave reminders about other husbandry issues or tasks," says Mr Skelton.

It's the small things that can really make a difference and help to retain and motivate staff and build your 'dream' team. Listening and communicating well will create an environment that people want to work in – they'll be loyal and you'll get the best from them. And you could close that revolving door once and for all. |