



**Staff-shortage solutions**

This is the final article in our series that takes a closer look at dairy labour. Many UK producers are facing the increasingly difficult challenge of finding staff to manage and run their herds and businesses. So how can they attract and inspire the next generation and keep them motivated and passionate about working in the sector?

Part 1: **Dairy labour: why there is a shortage?**

Part 2: **Recruiting and retaining staff**

Part 3: **Inspiring the next generation**

Part 4: **Success stories – team building and motivation**

We spoke to a dairy training specialist to find out why producers and herd managers should hold regular meetings to help motivate and retain staff, and develop a team spirit.

text **Rachael Porter**

**T**he key difference between dairy units with a high and low staff turnover can be boiled down to one simple thing – team meetings, or rather the lack of them. So says Kite Consulting’s Sophie Helyer, who runs regular training courses across the UK on managing and motivating staff.

She says, from her experience, that there are many factors that play a vital role in retaining and motivating staff. But the one area where producers ‘could do better’ is creating a team atmosphere on their unit. “And this begins with having regular team meetings, engaging with staff and encouraging them to communicate and work with you and each other.”

Engaging with staff then allows producers to find out what motivates them and this, inevitably, also leads to better retention. “Build a happy and cohesive team and you also create a better working environment – somewhere they will want to spend every working day – and staff will stay with you.”

Ms Helyer, who also has first-hand experience of managing a large team of staff on a 1,600-cow dairy unit, says that meetings are, in effect, about improving communication.

“Producers who struggle to retain staff are often still working with an authoritative/dictatorial style. They’ll tell an employee to do something – often with little or no instruction or explanation – and without giving any reasons, objectives or targets. Staff are left in the dark and can feel demotivated. And there’s also little or no feedback for the employee, unless it’s negative or critical.”

Developing a team approach  
**Let staff set**



# is key to retaining dairy staff the agenda



At the other end of the scale are producers who will explain how they'd like a task to be done and why. "They might also offer training, if they feel it's required. And there's certainly constructive feedback – whether the results are good or bad," adds Ms Helyer. "But it's never 'personal' – it's about the job and how well it's been done, or if and how it could be done better.

"Perhaps the staff need more time, better equipment, or there's another issue that needs addressing. But it's all discussed in a positive way. These employers avoid creating a 'blame' culture and setting up an 'us and them' scenario when it comes to management and staff."

## Staff communication

She refers to this as 'below the line' rather than 'above the line'. "Producers should always aim to be 'above the line' when it comes to staff communication and working relationships."

Managing a dairy business successfully, particularly in larger herds, should be a team approach and that means working together – supporting and encouraging each other – to get the job done to the most efficient and effective level. "Feeling valued is just as important as feeling part of a team," she says.

"Employees need to be told that they are doing a good job and, again, this is an area of staff management where many producers 'could do better'.

"If you ask someone to do something in a particular way, or to meet a target, let them know how they're doing. Feedback is vital; all too often, employers are quick to flag up a problem. But it's also important to acknowledge a job well done."

Protocols and setting objectives – ensuring that they're SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time based) – helps here. "It's difficult to set targets and measure success without them. Short-term business objectives could be reducing somatic cell count, or calving interval, or the number of zero-value culls."

And setting objectives should also be a team issue, and this is where team meetings come in. "Yet many producers are not holding team meetings – not even on a monthly basis."

But some, she has found, see regular meetings as a starting point in better people management and



*Sophie Helyer: "Holding regular team meetings is a good starting point"*



*Discussion points: teams can work together to improve their approach to dairy management tasks, and to meet targets and objectives*

retaining staff. “Bringing people together to discuss the herd and business creates encourages a team approach. It creates an arena to discuss and delegate jobs more efficiently,” explains Ms Helyer.

And, if there’s an issue with the herd – perhaps butterfat levels have fallen or mastitis cases have increased – the meeting creates an arena for discussion and problem solving. “When it comes to the latter, there’s rarely one thing that’s causing an issue. It could be milking routine, it could be dirty calving pens, it could be fly control. See what staff say. They’re the ones working with the cows each day and they’ll flag up potential problem areas. Let them take ownership and they’ll also thrive on the challenge and the satisfaction of resolving issues and seeing improvements.”

### **Just share**

The whole ‘meeting’ scenario may seem alien to some producers: “But stick with it. It will get easier and you will see rewards for your efforts,” stresses Ms Helyer. “Begin by having just a couple of things to discuss, such as silage analysis results or the latest somatic cell count figures. Just share what’s going on with the herd and business – good and bad. Make your staff feel involved and that their input and opinions matter.

“You may discover, through talking together as a team, that one member of staff is particularly interested in tackling mastitis, for example, and can look into a new approach that can be tried out.” Day-to-day conversation is vital too; outside of the regular meetings. “It’s important to show that you care about your staff. So something as simple as asking how someone’s weekend was or if they have

any plans for their evening – just general chit-chat – shows that you’re interested in them. They’re not just someone you pay to do a job.”

### **Important words**

She adds that important words for any manager to remember – and use more often – are: ‘hello’, ‘please’, ‘thank you’, and ‘well done’. “Taking the time to say ‘thank you’ properly costs nothing and goes a long way to making a staff member feel appreciated and valued. And I don’t just mean a quick ‘thanks’, I mean: ‘thank you for staying an extra hour last night to finish that job – I really appreciated your help’.

She suggests following this up with a gesture, perhaps the chance to knock off early one afternoon and another reference to how much you appreciated them working late earlier in the week. Staff need to feel fulfilled and appreciated. And producers with high staff turnover are often failing to meet even the most basic employee needs. “A typical example is a broken wheel on an office chair, or a kettle that doesn’t work. These are irritating and small things, but they can make all the difference to someone’s working day.

“If an employee flags up something like this, it should be dealt with quickly. Such things are usually easy to fix and, because of this, if the request falls on deaf ears or is forgotten about, then they’ll feel undervalued, ignored and disrespected.

“So sort out the little things quickly and don’t let these deter them from working as a team in focussing on the bigger picture of managing your herd and business. They’ll reward you with loyalty and commitment.” |