

# In case of emerge



What would you do if you – or a key member of staff – had to take time off work? Have you got it covered? Read on to see if you could be doing more to make your team and management system more resilient.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

**A**ll too often, particularly on smaller units, one person is the lynchpin when it comes to the day-to-day and, indeed, more in-depth management of the dairy herd. So, what happens if they're sick or injured? Do you have so-called 'key man' cover?

That's the question that Farm Consultancy Group's Harry Edwards has been asking his clients, after a few cases of 'panic' brought this potential pitfall to his attention. "Not least of these was my own forced absence from work, a little over a year ago, due to a spell of ill health. Fortunately I'm now fully recovered, but this served to highlight an area that we regularly discuss with clients but had not actually got around to preparing for in our office. Definitely a case of do as I say, not as I do – although not any more.

"Our own experience really drove the message home about just how little we may actually know about other people's roles and how quickly things can unravel if the person that knows – and does – everything suddenly isn't there."

So do you have plans in place – in case of emergency? That's a question he urges his clients to think about and then act on.

"Most producers who do have a plan in place have one because they've been caught out before and have learned the hard way. Yet it's something that can be planned for with relatively little additional effort."

The key, according to Mr Edwards, is communication. Whether that's a one-man-band producer making sure that their relief milker knows the routines just in case they should be called in for emergency cover. Or staff working in a bigger



team and managing a larger herd where they need to talk to each other and understanding each other's roles and responsibilities should they need to cover someone's absence."

### **Communication 'test'**

He says that an ideal opportunity to test if communication and understanding are sufficient to enable effective cover is staff holidays. "Perhaps when one particular team member is away things tend to go a bit awry, so find out why and take additional steps if necessary. More discussion about their role with other team members, and about what went wrong and why, can help here. It's typically poor communication and a lack of understanding of the role and tasks that need to be performed – nothing that can't be ironed out relatively easily. "And remember, things don't necessarily have to be done in the same way. They just need to be done correctly if the outcome is to be the same. Filling big shoes can be daunting enough, without the expectation that things be done exactly as someone else would do them."

### **Increase awareness**

Mr Edwards says that there's no need to make a meal of it either and have every task, job and role written in stone.



Harry Edwards,  
farm business consultant:  
**"It's about taking a step  
back and looking at  
the bigger picture"**

"Just an increased awareness of what's going on across the unit and why, whether that be for a team or a member of relief staff. Just keep people in the loop.

"Tasks on farm not only change with the seasons – they can also change every week. TMR ration formulations, for example, may alter. A block of calving or serving may be about to start. Keeping everyone up to date goes a long way to ensure that the smooth running of a herd or business isn't all, literally, down to one person.

"Even when producers are aware that they will have to take time off – perhaps they need treatment for an illness or an operation – they can sometimes stick their head in the sand. "This creates a stressful situation for them and any other members of staff. Why muddle through when you can talk and plan? Recovery times can be faster if you plan ahead and minimise stress."

He says that one person may be the strength of a herd's success – the key man. But, if they're suddenly not there, then they can suddenly become the business' biggest weakness.

"It's about assessing risk – particularly on family run units with very little spare capacity, should someone become ill or injured. On larger units, where members of staff often have different roles and responsibilities, it's a case of ensuring that at least one other person on the team can deputise, effectively, in their absence."

Written protocols – possibly posted up on the office wall – can help. But such a formal approach isn't always necessary. "More typically an open discussion about what would happen if a key member of staff was away will suffice. And this should be combined with regular weekly 'catch up' meetings, so everyone in the team – or the family-run business – knows what's going on and are able to take on key responsibilities, if required."

### **Side effects**

Mr Edwards adds that a happy side effect of such meetings is that everyone is more clued up about the running of the herd. "It's a great way to ensure that people feel valued and recognised as vital to the success of the business. Part-time relief staff are more likely to drop everything and step and help in an emergency if you take them along with you and get them on board with and involved in any contingency plans. For a start, they won't feel out of their depth because they'll know what needs to be done. And they'll also feel valued and that they're an important part of your business. It goes a long way to developing loyalty."

"And good communication is often all it takes. Even paying for extra labour to cover an absence is well worth the investment if herd and business management continues to run smoothly and others avoid excessive workloads and stress."

"It's about taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture, recognising any potential weak areas and taking steps to ensure that you can plug any holes in labour requirements, as and when they appear." |