

Effective Employee Training

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I like to summarize a good training method as:
Tell them. Show them. Tell me. Show me.

You knew when you hired “Dusty” that he didn’t come from a farm, but he seems interested in working and willing to work hard. And, although “Inky” is good with animals, she seems a bit lost in the tractor cab that has more numerical displays than airplanes did just 10 years ago.

That is the reality of farm employees these days: Fewer come with farm or ranch experience and the business of farming and ranching involves more technology all the time. Not only that, but there is an increased emphasis on cattle well-being and proper handling. In addition, the economy demands increased productivity from every aspect of the business, including employees. These realities place a greater importance on educating employees.

Employees and learning

Whether employees grew up on farms or they completed school, all employees need to learn in order for your business to get the best and the most from them. In research by Stan Moore and me with dairy farm employees, we discovered that nearly all employees say that they want to learn. They want to learn so that they can help the business succeed.

While there is a desire to learn, it doesn’t mean that teaching Dusty will

be as easy as it sounds or that helping Inky won’t be without setbacks. What are some characteristics of effective training?

Repetition. We rarely get it all the first time. When learning a new skill, employees need to try what they know and then fill in the things they forgot.

Progressive instruction. Initially, we need to teach the minimum to get them started, and then we need to regularly build on that introduction to train employees in greater depth. Plan a series of sessions in which you review and expand their knowledge.

Explain “why.” We not only want employees to know “what” to do, but “why” we do it, and why we do it a certain way. Explain how animal behavior is affected by the practice. Explain how the physiology of the animal is important to the response. Explain what happens with animals and on the farm when we deviate from the protocols.

Involve employees in teaching. The best way to learn is to teach. Assign current employees to teach different skills or segments of the material

you want new employees to learn. Be there, but give them the freedom to teach it differently than you would.

Set an example

As an employer, set an example for employees. Be a role model. You probably attend workshops or conferences, talk with peers and call your extension agent or university specialist, in addition to reading relevant articles. It would be a good idea to share with employees things that you learn. Consider this possible conversation:

You: “I was at a meeting with Nebraska extension and the agent suggested this . . . What do you think?”

Inky: “Really, I don’t know, I never thought about that much. But I’m willing to give it a try.”

Dusty: “Yeah, I heard some of the guys from over at . . . saying that they do something like that and it seems to work for them. Yeah, I’ll try it but you’ve gotta help me learn how to do it.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 58

Another way to model learning is to leave a copy of *Nebraska Cattleman* on the table with a note on it that says something like “Read the article on page ___ and let’s talk about it Monday.” Then set aside time for that discussion. Employees should understand that learning is important for everybody in the business, including you.

Learning is not the goal

The goal is not simply learning. The goal is really to improve actions based on what they have learned. I like to think of education as a 4-step process: learn, communicate, decide and act.

1. Learn. That is the basis. One cannot do what one does not know.

2. Communicate. We don’t do business alone. Everyone needs to be on the same page. When you learn something, tell others, get their input and discuss how to implement new practices.

3. Decide. The purpose of knowledge is to make better decisions. We want employees to make better decisions based on what they have learned. Employers also need to make good decisions based on what they learn.

4. Act. Whether the action is a daily one or one that starts us in a new di-

rection, action should be the result of knowledge.

What does it take to be a good teacher?

Each person is different and your strengths are likely different from those of others, but there are certain personal characteristics for training to be successful, including these:

- **Patience** – Remember how much patience was needed when you taught someone to drive a car? Learning often happens slowly because people may think they already know, and it is only when that fails that they are ready to listen.
- **Repetitiveness** – We assume that every word out of our mouth is heard and remembered. In truth, retention is probably a lot less than we believe. Keep at it in order to be effective.
- **Humbleness** – Don’t treat your employees like they are only there to be used. Appreciate their experiences and insights; you may even learn things from them. Tell them how valuable they are to help your business be successful.
- **Persistence** – If it is worth them learning, it is worth investing ad-

ditional time until they understand, make decisions and do the task correctly. Use every opportunity, including failures, to reinforce what they are learning.

Show and tell

I like to summarize a good training method as: Tell them. Show them. Tell me. Show me. Simply stated, we need to both show and tell someone how to do what we want. They need to see it in action; but it shouldn’t stop there. Have them explain it back to you. Have them demonstrate how it is done, explaining the steps and the decision-making process. Then you know they understand. Remember that not everyone learns the same. Some respond better to verbal training, but most individuals learn best through visual training and learning while doing.

When is enough, enough?

It may be that you have worked with Dusty over a period of time. You have shown him and gone through the procedures outlined above. Either he clearly doesn’t understand, can’t remember or chooses not to do things the right way. You have been patient and pointed out errors and used those as opportunities for more clear explanation. However, it seems that his lack of understanding is a bottomless pit. It is time to let him go.

On the other hand, Inky seems to be a bottomless pit for learning. She is always anxious to learn more and consistently applies what she learns. She has suggested practical and useful changes, and now she is asking if she can attend a conference to learn more. Keep feeding her desire to learn. One farm owner told me, “a learning employee is a thinking employee, and I want thinking employees.”

What are you doing this month to help your employees to learn, and consequently, to think? ■ Ng ■

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