

## Building A Dairy Farm Team

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Would anyone doubt that a successful dairy farm requires a team effort? Silly question? Not at all. Most dairy farms have groups of people or collections of individuals rather than teams. Success does not demand a team approach. A farm manager who prefers a team approach faces a tough test of patience, people skills and communication.

### Team Basics

A dairy farm can have a team of people, a group or just a collection of individuals. The differences among the three are important:

**Team** → Several people who *work together* as a *cohesive unit* to achieve specific, shared goals.

**Group** → Several people who have common goals but work *independently* without depending on each other for their success.

**Individuals** → Several individuals who work *independently* to accomplish their individual goals without depending on each other for their success.

There are good reasons for dairy farm managers to form teams. Successful teams are likely to help managers accomplish the following:

1. Efficiency in use of farm resources
2. Complementarity of skills brought to the team by its members
3. Reinforcement of goals, standards, procedures and rules
4. Mentoring of newer and less skilled team members by other team members
5. Esprit de corps from team members personally enjoying each others' company and the team's accomplishments
6. Peer pressure to help meet team goals and to correct performance deficiencies
7. Monitoring of performance at both the individual and team level

However, people sometimes have understandable reasons for resisting teamwork:

1. Previous negative experiences with attempts at teamwork
2. Fear of the risk that goes with commitment to a team effort
3. Management's failure to develop an atmosphere of trust in a team's ability to be good for both the farm and individuals
4. Some people not fitting well into a team environment, e.g., perfectionists, scorekeepers, grudge carriers, loners and procrastinators.

### **Stages of Team Development**

A dairy farm group goes through several stages before becoming a highly efficient and effective team. The stages are:

1. Forming
2. Storming
3. Initial Integration (norming)
4. Total Integration
5. Dissolution

Teams go through these stages at different rates and in different ways. Most will go through all five stages provided they don't stall at an early stage and cease to function.

*Note carefully!* We are describing a process uncommon in group work. Teamwork is easy rhetoric. The practice of teamwork challenges even the most experienced dairy farm managers. Some farm managers look for "top down" shortcuts. Some scoff at the time necessary to turn a group of people into a team. However, for those who understand the principles and then work hard at implementation, the payoffs can justify the effort.

We turn now to the characteristics typically associated with each of the five stages in the team development process.

1. Forming
  - Members become acquainted
  - Members learn about goals and tasks of the team
  - Members evaluate work associated with and benefits of the team relative to career and personal needs
  - Most everyone exhibits good behavior and courtesy

- Leader identified
- Preliminary plans made for the next steps
- Members enjoy a good and seemingly easy start

#### 1. Storming

- High emotion
- Conflict may occur during long and seemingly inefficient meetings
- There is a lot of “behind the bosses’ back” and “behind the leaders’ back” kind of grumbling
- High emotion characterizes some of the interaction among team members
- Doubts based on previous negative experiences cause people to be cautious
- Doubts emerge about ability to deliver all that is expected
- Writing a mission statement and/or goals is stressful and leads to additional statements about differences of opinion
- Outcome finally is to push ahead with a sense of some important progress has been made but that there is much still to be accomplished

#### 1. Initial Integration (norming)

- Team begins to function cooperatively
- Rules of acceptable conduct, or norms, are established
- Team needs begin to take precedent over individual needs
- Hostility ceases
- Mission statement and detailed goals are completed
- Individuals begin to experience benefits of close cooperation with others on the team
- Sense of closeness and group purpose emerges
- Team has some major successes

#### 1. Total Integration

- Major successes continue
- Conflict is rational
- Creative tension regularly reappears
- "What next?" is a compulsive question
- Team struggles with how to handle changing membership
- Successes are widely recognized
- Members are concerned more about the team than their own successes
- Team is well organized; meetings are short and efficient

## 1. Dissolution

- No team goes on indefinitely
- Teams that have functioned well sense when change, new members and “mission accomplished” have taken members back to the forming stage.

## **Cultivating Team Performance**

Neither the farm manager nor outside cooperators, e.g., veterinarians, can accept responsibility for team performance. Each team is responsible for its own performance. However, the following guidelines for team members, managers and cooperators can help cultivate team performance:

1. Establish urgency. Have a driving cause, issue or need.
2. Pay particular attention to early planning meetings and actions. Remember that most groups never reach the norming stage of team development.
3. Set some clear rules of behavior. Those rules will vary team to team. Examples include: holding all scheduled team meetings, starting meetings on time, volunteering to help each other with disagreeable jobs, saying thank you, and not talking about problems with neighbors and friends.
4. Set and seize upon a few performance-oriented tasks and goals. Make them SMART: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ewarding, and **T**imed.
5. Challenge each other with fresh facts and information.
6. Spend lots of time together. There is no substitute for a team caring about its members and each team member caring about the welfare of the team. Celebrate birthdays, go to a baseball game together, have frequent team meetings, and have a daily "coffee break" together.
7. Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition and reward. Celebrating successes is time well spent.