



## Sick cows and employee problems aren't normal

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*Instead of accepting a certain level of problems, think about what you can do to prevent them – whether we are talking about fresh cow problems or employee problems.*

What is normal employee turnover rate? What is the rate at which farms have to hire new employees to replace ones who left, either voluntarily or involuntarily? In a study of 13 dairy farms in four states, Michigan State University Extension colleague Stan Moore and I found employee turnover rates among the farms studied to range from single digits to triple digits. While the average may have been around 50%, is that normal? The data indicated that some farms could achieve low rates of employee turnover, even while others struggled with retention of employees. Let's look at it from a different angle.

Years ago, I read an article in a dairy magazine that changed the way I looked at things from that point forward. The article by Dr. Meg Cattell, a veterinarian in Colorado, challenged my perception of what was normal. At that time, I was used to the “normal” percentages of fresh cow problems: such as milk fever < 5%, ketosis < 10%, retained placenta < 5% and so on. Cattell challenged that prevailing wisdom by saying that sickness is not normal – at any level. Normal is healthy. Anything less than healthy is abnormal. So stop excusing abnormal by saying it doesn't happen often. When it happens, it shouldn't.

Some will say that it is unrealistic to have 100% healthy cows all the time. Perhaps, but she is right that we often tolerate a certain level and assume that it can't be changed. But that is not true. It can be changed, but we have to work at prevention strategies. Prevention requires a lot of work and investment, but it yields the fruit of healthy cattle. The more emphasis a farmer puts on preventative care, the less abnormal sickness with which they have to deal.

For years I have kept that principle in mind, but it was only recently that I even considered its corollary: employees problems don't have to happen.

Now that I've said it, I find that it sounds astonishing given the level of problems that some farmers tell me about. It was a quote in another article that got me thinking. This time it was a business magazine rather than a dairy publication, and the quote was from the CEO of a business that was named one of the 2019 Best Workplaces by *Inc.* magazine. In the article, business owner and an awardee, David Hassell recalled meeting a CEO who vented that his number one job was “chief firefighter”, that is, dealing with employee problems. Hassell said he couldn't remember the last time he had to put out a fire.



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I've known many dairy farmers who would relate to the chief firefighter title. Some farmers regale each other with employee stories. But how many of those problems could be reduced, even eliminated with better prevention? How could employee problems become abnormal, rather than the norm?

Prevention is the key and it begins with the culture you create at work and the core values that you establish, communicate and use. Before you hire, prepare. Prepare what your evaluation criteria will be, what you will convey about your workplace and the standard to which you will hold this potential employee. In the hiring process, make sure they understand the type of business you run. That is not to say that you run a dairy, but what are the values that run through the dairy, what are the keys to success for employees and what are the most important criteria?

In the same article, Hassell said that because people feel connected to the company, they are more likely to act in its best interest. How do you help employees feel connected to your business? There needs to be more than a paycheck that connects them, because that has only a tenuous grip on their heart. Hassell went on to say that because employees feel connected to each other, there is less interpersonal drama. How do you help employees feel connected to each other?

After a farmer friend told me of employee problems he was having I challenged him to invest more time in walking with employees, sharing what he saw as he looked at facilities, cows, and equipment. One of the problems that he cited was that employees didn't think to clean the stock tank even if they saw it was dirty. Instead of blaming employees, take the time to educate them. As an employer, you need to be a leader who helps to change the way your people think. They need to better understand how you think, and that will only come by telling them.

Communication is a primary factor in avoiding misunderstandings, lack of action or redundancy of actions. Communication must be consistent so that no one can claim ignorance of what to do and how to do it. Your investment of time with employees won't have a quick payback nor will it work in all cases, but you should begin to see a change. Some problems will be prevented, others will be resolved more quickly as they respond to situations because of what you have taught them.

And when failure happens, that is, when an employee is fired or leaves, whose failure was it? Was it truly the failure of the employee or does management share in the cause? What have you been doing since the day you met the employee to instill in them your values and how they could be successful in your workplace? What kind of prevention have you been practicing? Had you been wondering what they thought and felt? Had you been monitoring the workplace "health" of employee contentment? How can you change to prevent the next failure?



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Remember where we started: fresh cow problems. Dairies have made great progress in reducing the impact of fresh cow problems. That happened because they didn't accept that problems were normal and they looked at everything from dry cow nutrition to bunk space to monitoring fresh cows to catch problems early. It is time to provide that level of care to employees. Just as it takes time to change the culture of the farm so there is no comfort level for sick cows, it will also take time to develop a workplace culture that brings out the best in your employees and helps them succeed. But that is a goal worth reaching!