



by Steve Martin

How to train your nutritionist

“HOW TO train” various things seems to be a common topic in many forms of media these days. A recent animated film series focuses on training dragons. There are many books aimed at improving pet behavior. A popular call-in radio host even wrote a book entitled, “The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands.”

Some of these are a little tongue-in-cheek, but the fact remains that both animals and people often need to be trained.

It occurred to me that maybe dairy producers could use a few tips about how to train their nutritionists. This may be a little counter-intuitive or even counter-cultural in the dairy industry, where some farms seem to change nutritionists about as fast as they change corn seed hybrids.

I can’t start this conversation without mentioning the obvious similarity between college football coaches and dairy nutritionists. Both professions are high-risk, often turbulent, and the turnover rate is high. The challenge with both jobs is how to bring a talented individual into an organization and teach them its culture so they can best use their expertise and passion to achieve the organization’s goals. This is not an easy task, but it is an important one.

One of the motivations for me to address this topic is the notable change I feel with a client when we unexpectedly cross some invisible line when I as the “outside” consultant feel like I am finally on the inside. I say unexpected because crossing that line is something I can’t really plan for, nor can I devise a stepwise process to achieve it. It just happens – but not every time and not with every client. All I can say is that when I cross that line I know it.

Perhaps it’s a crisis where the nutritionist really comes through to solve a problem. Or it might be more of a personal feeling where they spend some time connecting with the client on things that may not even relate to cows, milk or feed.

There is a worn-out saying that people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Worn out or not, it’s the truth.

As I progress through year one,



then year two and so on with clients who commit to really finding out how I can help them, there are maybe three distinct stages I see.

The first is filled with activity on the front end where we are changing lots of things while working hard to respect (and thus not change) things that are going well on the dairy.

Phase two is a bit of a lull while we wait to see if anything good comes from phase one.

Phase three is when a strong working relationship has been built and there is trust on each side to work toward long-term goals. Sometimes, unfortunately, we never get out of phase one.

It is important to remember a term we have all learned mostly from our dairy records analysis training: lag. Due to the many influences on how much milk a dairy sends across the scales every day, changes in production may be slow. Changes in cow health may be quicker, while improvements in reproduction can take even longer.

Results take time

Much of the next six months, or up to a year, of a dairy’s production results are already set into motion before a new nutritionist is even hired. Sure, there are things that can be made better, and there are things that can be wrecked more quickly, but the slow and methodical improvements that we all hope for take at least a little time.

Of course, there are often differences in expectations in various new relationships between dairy producers and nutritionists. It may be the dairy

is doing very poorly and has a long list of things that need to be changed in order to turn things around. Maybe the dairy has been down for only a short time and the fix can be quicker. Often, though, it seems that a down dairy has a lot of negative lag, so improved results may take a year to see in the cows.

I recently added a new client who told me to be careful to not mess up anything. This is not the norm! The goal was for me to figure out why the results were good and work hard to stay the course.

The funny thing about feeding and managing cows is there is not just one way to do it correctly. It’s kind of like building fence; there are many tools and methods that can result in straight posts and tight wire. Problems often occur when a team gets together to build the fence and different people apply the wrong tools to the method that is being used.

Good culture is golden

In our business there are many variables and many cultures. No two dairy farms are the same, not even two that are owned by the same person! A consulting nutritionist needs to take note of, and learn from, the differences and adjust their approach a bit to allow their expertise to have a positive impact on the dairy’s results.

I use the word “culture” because it is a good description of the differences between farms. The culture of each dairy is the result of the many intricacies of the people involved, the way they work together, and the goals they have as individuals and for the organization. Don’t assume

these goals are always aligned as you might think!

I have a favorite saying about my work in this industry: “This is a cow business. This is a people business. I am committed to both.” A dairy is a combination of animals, machinery, people, concrete, steel, feed, weather, etc. How the leader of each farm puts all of those things together determines its culture.

My point is that when you hire a nutritionist, be intentional about sharing your culture with them sooner than later. The quicker and more effectively you do, the better your nutritionist will be.

As you share your dairy’s culture with your nutritionist, don’t forget to also make clear the other expectations you may have. Some could be simple, but important to your team.

Maybe it’s the type of ration reports you like to see. How much detail do you want? Who is going to keep up with various ingredient prices? How often do you want to have a farm visit? And do you have specific goals for routine farm calls?

Other details, like your style of bidding minerals or other ingredients and how you expect the nutritionist to deal with salespeople, are also important. Be clear on them so the nutritionist’s important advisor role can best meet your needs and expectations.

There are many people in the nutrition business who are somewhere between pretty good and really good at the task of building dairy diets. But there are a couple of other factors that will determine whether the rations they build will be successful.

First, how much does the ration builder care about the cows and the people who manage them?

Second, how much effort do the owner, manager and employees of the dairy put into sharing the culture of the dairy with the nutritionist? This effort will allow the consultant to adjust as needed to build diets and offer advice that is appropriate for that particular dairy.

Good rations and great rations can both be successful if they are based upon a good understanding of the goals and culture of the dairy. Helping your nutritionist achieve genuine team member status in your business will greatly increase the chance that he or she can truly feed your cows for the bottom line. **WEST**

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