

## **When leadership shows up: How manager and owner involvement transforms dairy employee training**

By Maristela Rovai, South Dakota State University, and Lynn Boadwine, South Dakota State University and Boadwine Farms Inc., Baltic, S.D.

**Dairy farms invest time and effort in employee training, yet results often disappoint.** Knowledge fades within weeks (70% of skills gained in training are lost within 4 to 6 weeks), procedures aren't implemented consistently and operations quickly return to old patterns. The difference between **training** that creates temporary awareness and training that generates lasting transformation **NOT only lies in the content but also in who participates, how the training environment is created and the quality of follow-up.**

### **Understanding adult learning and workforce diversity**

**Adult learning principles:** Adults don't learn like children. Andragogy (Knapp 1833, Knowles 1984) recognizes that adults bring valuable experience, need practical goals, require facilitation rather than dictation, and must balance work responsibilities with learning. Effective training honors Xunzi's wisdom: "What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I learn."

**Generational differences:** Baby Boomers (61-79) prefer in-person instruction; Gen X (45-60) values flexibility; Millennials (29-44) are collaborative digital natives; Gen Z (13-28) responds to visual, mobile, gamified content.

**Educational background matters:** Many dairy employees have limited formal education. Mexico has an average of 6 years, Honduras has 12.3% no schooling, Guatemala has very low rural schooling, and El Salvador and Nicaragua have similar low rural educational attainment. Those with limited education learn best through observation and repetition, need extensive hands-on demonstrations, respond well to visual explanations and can become frustrated with complex jargon. Also, many employees from Guatemala and Mexico speak indigenous dialects and have difficulties understanding Spanish.

**CRITICAL CHALLENGE: Employees commonly nod "yes" without actually understanding – making it essential to verify comprehension through demonstration, not just verbal confirmation.**

**Language and comprehension verification:** Never assume nodding means understanding. Always verify comprehension by: (1) Having employees demonstrate what was taught, (2) Using visual aids and photos that transcend language, (3) Practicing repeatedly with immediate feedback, (4) Encouraging questions through demonstration, rather than just asking, "Do you understand?" Training must accommodate generational characteristics, educational background AND language/dialect diversity through hands-on practice, visual aids, simple language and group learning.

### **Creating the right environment: Respect and recognition**

**Providing food and hospitality:** Providing meals during training is not a luxury; it's a fundamental expression of respect and hospitality. When employees arrive for training to find food ordered for them, several important messages are communicated:

- The organization values their time and recognizes they've taken time before or after their work shift
- Their well-being matters beyond just their labor output
- The farm is willing to invest in their comfort and learning experience
- They are being treated as valued professionals, not just workers

This simple act of providing food addresses the most basic level of Maslow's hierarchy – physiological needs – and creates the foundation for higher-level learning. Hungry, tired and uncomfortable people cannot focus effectively on complex information. When these basic needs are met, participants can engage fully in the learning process.

**Milking crew employees are skilled professionals who have been trained, continue learning and apply sophisticated knowledge daily – not just hard workers.**

**Pre-training observation:** Effective training begins with thorough observation of current practices, identifying what's done well and what needs improvement, understanding equipment constraints and reviewing milk

quality data. Most importantly, it establishes baseline data against which post-training improvements can be measured. Training that addresses the actual situation is far more relevant and effective than training based on assumptions about what employees need to learn.

### Hands-on learning: From classroom to parlor

**Classroom practice with udder model:** During milking training, employees practice on the udder model – understanding the “WHY” behind each protocol step and developing muscle memory for specifically teat wiping. This builds confidence without stress, allows immediate feedback and enables practice until proficiency. Training requires intentional leadership.



**Classroom training emphasizing the importance of hands-on learning and active participation**

**In the milking parlor:** Managers and owners physically demonstrate procedures alongside employees in the actual parlor. When ownership demonstrates proper techniques in the real work environment, it communicates unmistakably that these procedures matter. This hands-on approach breaks down barriers and creates opportunities for immediate practice with guidance.



**Milking Parlor interactive sessions with the owner explaining how to properly prepare the cow**

**Farm-wide knowledge:** Training extends beyond the parlor to explain cow comfort, animal physiology, health monitoring and milk quality testing – helping employees understand how their work connects to farm success, cows’ health and employee well-being.

**Farm-wide communication:** Everyone on the farm related to the area of milking must know what was covered in trainings and what changes may be implemented. This prevents inadvertent undermining of possible new procedures, respecting what they learned and creates coordinated improvement.

### THE CRITICAL FACTOR: Manager and owner involvement

**Manager and owner participation is the single most critical factor determining whether training investment produces results or wasted resources.**

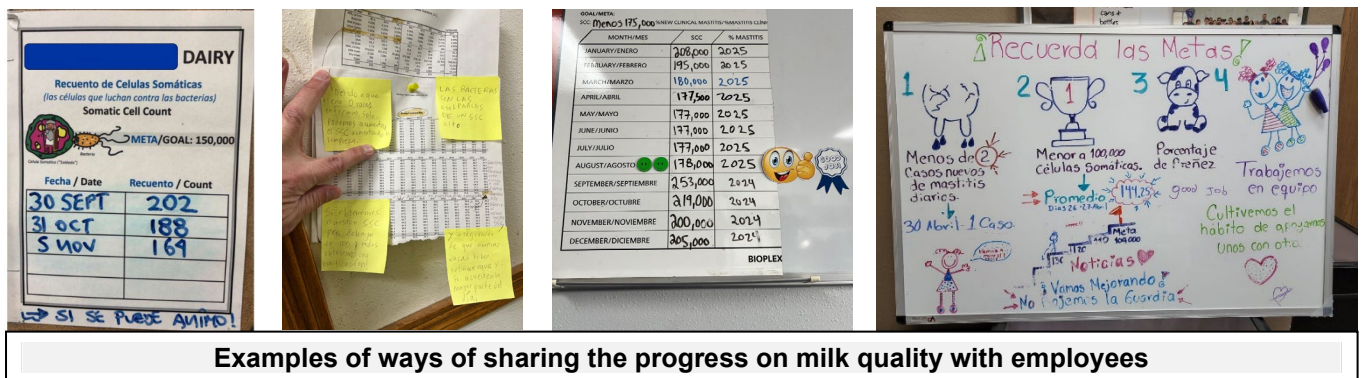
**Why management participation matters:** (1) **Organizational legitimacy** – presence communicates priority, increasing engagement; (2) **Acknowledging hard work** – public recognition creates motivation and loyalty; (3) **Cultural bridge building** – learning together builds trust across differences; (4) **Effective reinforcement** –

managers who participated can recognize correct practices and provide feedback; (5) **Preventing disconnects** – ensures consistency between training and daily expectations.

**Cultural leadership structure:** For Latino employees, a patriarchal leadership structure is culturally important. Employees need to hear clear, direct instructions from farm owners and general managers periodically – not just from supervisors. When the owner/manager personally addresses the team with clear direction and reinforces expectations, it carries significant weight and authority. This direct communication from top leadership, even if it's once a year, reinforces organizational priorities and demonstrates that leadership is personally invested in the team's success and the farm's standards.

#### Follow-up: Making improvement visible and sustainable

**Visual progress tracking:** Whiteboards displaying daily somatic cell count (SCC), weekly quality metrics and production data show employees the direct impact of improved practices. When milking crews see SCC is dropping over weeks, they experience pride and motivation to maintain improvements.



Examples of ways of sharing the progress on milk quality with employees

**WhatsApp Communication Group:** A game-changing tool and a less cumbersome way to communicate with employees, it's easy to leave voice messages, send texts, share photos and videos, has a built-in translation option, works for any cell phone model under a wireless connection, and is the most used method among Latino employees. Therefore, it enables real-time problem reporting, quick expert responses, knowledge sharing, daily metrics posting and schedule coordination. This group also creates an environment where employees feel heard and continuous improvement becomes embedded. **IMPORTANT:** Management must be responsive, participative or the group fails.

**Follow-up schedule:** Conduct daily check-ins and hold monthly or quarterly meetings to review progress and acknowledge sustained improvements.

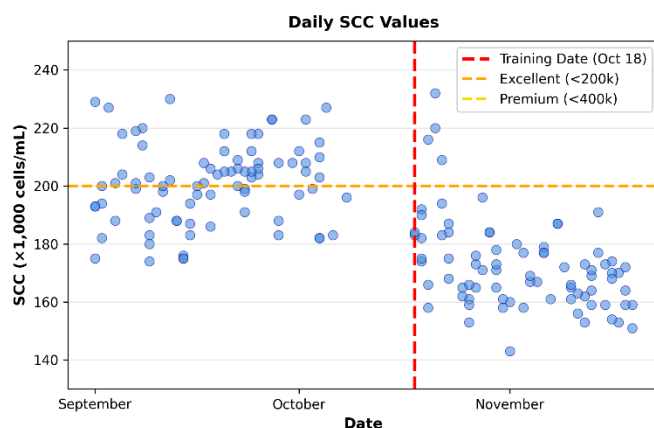
**Team leaders must motivate daily:** Sustained improvement requires team leaders and managers to motivate their teams through recognition and small gestures. Bring chocolates, coffee or snacks for meetings. Publicly acknowledge successes – even small improvements matter. Celebrate when SCC drops, when a difficult cow is handled well and when equipment problems are caught early. These simple acts of recognition cost little but communicate that management notices and values good work. Motivation isn't just annual bonuses; it's daily acknowledgment, weekly encouragement and consistent appreciation that keep teams engaged and striving for excellence.

**Just as we cannot skip feeding cows, we cannot skip training and scheduled meetings with employees. These must be non-negotiable, regularly scheduled commitments – not optional activities done only when convenient.**

#### REAL farm results after training

On Oct. 18, 2025, we conducted parlor training at a dairy where management fully participated, food was provided and hands-on practice with a udder model was used. **Results:**





### Bulk Tank Milk tracking:

**SCC:** Sept 202k → Oct 188k → Nov 167k  
(17% improvement sustained)

**LPC & SPC:** Between September and November, the Standard Plate Count decreased from 3,600 to 1,900 (47% improvement), while the Laboratory Pasteurized Count dropped from 93 to 43 (54% improvement)

While this drop cannot be attributed solely to training – as multiple factors influence milk quality – it clearly demonstrates the fast impact of implementing the right training approach and maintaining a consistent and comprehensive follow-up.

### What made this training successful

- Thorough pre-training observation of current practices
- Welcoming environment with food provided
- Full manager and owner participation throughout
- Hands-on practice with the udder model in the classroom
- Management demonstrating techniques in the actual parlor
- Public acknowledgment of employees as skilled professionals
- Visual management systems tracking daily progress
- WhatsApp group for ongoing communication with key personnel
- Farm-wide communication about training and goals
- Consistent management follow-up and reinforcement
- Regular progress reviews showing the impact of improvements
- Clear expectations and consistent accountability

### Take home message

**Comprehensive, manager and owner-involved training produces dramatic, measurable, sustained improvements.** Success requires full management participation, farm-wide communication, visual progress tracking, WhatsApp groups and consistent follow-up.

**Your milking crew consists of highly skilled professionals who learn and apply sophisticated knowledge daily.** When you treat them as such – with respect, hands-on and genuine involvement, and consistent follow-up – they respond with excellence that directly impacts farm success.

### Training is a strategic investment, not an expense!

**Invest in comprehensive, manager and owner-involved training with proper follow-up and reap measurable returns, or continue with superficial efforts and watch resources disappear without lasting impact. The decision is yours.**

If you have a comment or need assistance, contact: [maristela.rovai@sdsta.edu](mailto:maristela.rovai@sdsta.edu)