



Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Communication

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Good Communication is Valuable!

Your employees are on the front lines of your farming operation; they are the ones who see the pigs every day, the ones representing your business to other businesses that you interact with, and in some cases, they may have ideas that differ from your own on how to best accomplish some tasks on the farm. Communication breakdowns are at the heart of many on-farm conflicts – whether between employees, between managers and employees, amongst managers, or among family members.

Unfortunately, communication is one of those things that is always there to be worked on. Therefore, it has a tendency to fall back in the list of priorities when you are busy and forced to focus on tasks that are urgent or time sensitive. The consequences to not addressing communication issues on the farm are often not felt until the situation gets out of control.

Common Causes of Communication Barriers

Physical Barriers

• Time!

- o Communication is important – but – it takes time. Time for actively communicating amongst managers, for example, must be set aside.
- o Shift managers may not naturally cross paths in such a way that facilitates active communication about key issues on the farm. Managers may need to investigate planning meetings to facilitate communication amongst all members of the management team.

• Physical Location.

- o Are employees spread all across the farm? Are employees spread across multiple farming operations? Consider getting employees together in a convenient location to facilitate teamwork in addressing key issues.
- o Is there a physical location that is appropriate for on-farm meetings with employees? If the farm office does not facilitate effective communication, is there a break or lunch room that employees would be comfortable meeting in?

Cultural Barriers

- **Organizational Culture: It is hard to change a bad first impression!**

- o It is extremely difficult to recreate a work environment. It is very difficult to change an organizational or farm culture if employees routinely feel that their opinions do not matter and that they are not being listened to. It is far more effective to create an environment which facilitates open communication before problems arise and people start 'shutting down'.

- **Differences in Communication across Cultures.**

- o Different cultures have varying degrees of social acceptance in contradicting the opinion of a boss or coworker with seniority over oneself. If employees feel that they cannot contradict the opinion of the senior members of the team and the senior members of the team are actively making their opinions heard, it will be extremely difficult to elicit the input of less senior team members.

- **Language Barriers.**

- o Clearly if employees and employers are unable to communicate in writing and verbally, a number of challenges are expected to arise. Awareness of the consequences of a long-term lack of clear communication is the first step. Active steps towards improving communication should be initiated and will benefit the employees as well as the farm operation.

Non-Verbal Cues, Gestures, and Other Barriers

- **Non-Verbal Cues and Gestures.**

- o Body language, including how one stands or carries themselves, how one holds their hands and arms during a conversation, and facial expressions can have a major impact on communication. It is, for example, difficult to converse openly with someone who has their arms crossed across their chest and stands in a defensive pose.

- **Attitudes and Preconceived Notions.**

- o It is difficult to effectively communicate with employees who are dissatisfied with their position, unhappy with their jobs, or insecure in their abilities. If attitudes or preconceived notions about what the farm is trying to accomplish are barriers to effective communication managers must determine if addressing the core problem of the employee may be beneficial.

- o Personality conflicts can arise amongst employees, managers, or between the two groups. Personality conflicts can hinder communication, but strategies to facilitate communication can be explored so that the two parties can effectively participate in actively sending and receiving information as necessary to complete their respective jobs.

- **Preoccupied by other worries.**

- o Each of us has days on which personal concerns, whether the health of a family member or a stressed personal relationship, take a toll on our ability to effectively communicate at work.

Communication is a Skill

Good communication is a skill which can be learned, improved upon, and evaluated. Consider evaluating communication as a job skill. If you feel uncomfortable in evaluating communication skills, consider employing someone from outside the farm to facilitate employee evaluation and/or communication. Don't be afraid to try new communication aides to help employees communicate with you and with their coworkers. Good communication takes work. But, the payoffs of good on-farm communication can be large! And, the consequences of poor communication can be dire, as communication failures often lead to disasters that are much more difficult to fix than they would have been to avoid.

Communicating with Technology

Today, there are several mediums in which to communicate with your employees. For any set of circumstances it might be appropriate to talk with an employee face-to-face, over the phone, via text messaging, or even with an email. It is critical that the medium in which you communicate with your employees is considered. For example, the appropriate medium to tell your employees they need to work Sunday morning might be different than to reaffirm your thankfulness for their dedication after a long week of feeding in snow and ice. All of these mediums can be used, it is managements' role to determine which medium is appropriate for the message, the situation, and the receiver. Never use one of the above barriers of communication as a reason for selecting the medium. For example, do not avoid all face-to-face communication with an individual and use email or text messaging as a crutch; make an effort to select the medium which best fits the situation at hand.

Summary

Good communication is valuable for farm managers and beneficial to the farm business. There are various barriers that can arise to block effective communication: physical barriers, cultural barriers, non-verbal cues, gestures, and other barriers can all block effective communication. Look at developing good communication skills as a part of your employees (and your own) professional development and consult outside help if necessary.