



# CARING DAIRYING

## Lessons and Conclusions from the Caring Dairying Large Herds Survey

People management skills within large dairy herds generally aren't great. This doesn't really come as a surprise; it's what most businesses struggle with, however is a very important issue for large herds. Most animal problems stem from people problems – a high proportion of animal health conditions can be prevented by better husbandry and better skills. People are the single biggest impactor on animals and you can't run a large herd without them. And, incidentally, good people management costs less!

Staff turnover is way too high. This is partially due to poor people management practices. 53% of staff interviewed had been on that farm for less than a year. 41% of staff had been in the industry for less than three years. This means we have a very inexperienced work force – some animal and general farming skills take years to fully develop. This needs to be considered carefully when allocating tasks and taken into account when contemplating the ongoing training needs for your farm to reach full potential.

Are we employing the right people? Only 55% of staff believed they were thoroughly interviewed and reference checked when they were employed. This is a very low number and means that we will often make poor hiring decisions. Nearly 25% of staff interviewed made no conscious choice to work in the dairy industry – therefore, we need to be aware that the vast majority of these people are unlikely to be passionate about their work and this could have impacts on the way they treat animals.

The top two reasons why people leave the dairy industry are lifestyle and money. They are also the reasons why people come into the industry. We must be getting something wrong here. When hiring, it's a good idea to do a reality check with people and see if they really know what they are getting in to and take the opportunity to set realistic expectations.

The whole dirty dairying image is having an impact on our ability to attract and retain talent into the industry. The way we treat people, animals and the environment does matter. It matters to our target employment audience and it matters to our buying market. We need to get better at this. Some people take this seriously whilst others don't seem to care – this is not good enough. Every one of us must take responsibility and accountability for the way we treat people, animals and the environment.

The survey highlighted a real lack of leadership. Most managers interviewed felt they were strong and capable leaders, but when pressed, many of them didn't really know what this meant or required. Many didn't understand the difference between leadership and management. Staff need leadership. As in the case of people management, leadership is a skill that we must develop if we are to be truly successful in large herds.

The survey showed a real issue with the way we train and develop our people. In most cases, training is not cohesive, appropriately targeted or supported by on the job supervision. This included the training provided by AglITO. In some cases, managers were abdicating their responsibility for training to AglITO – AglITO are one of the learning forums but they can't and won't teach your staff everything they need to know. As managers, we must take the responsibility for the training and development of staff – we must ensure their skills are growing and appropriate to the needs of our farm.

Not getting the basics right – we seem to have lost our way on this. Many people are trying to run before they can walk and don't understand the importance of getting basics right or even what the basics are.

Many large herd farms are not set up well enough for the size of the herd. Many farms grow in a haphazard unplanned manner around the requirements of increased cow numbers. Infrastructure becomes piecemeal and inadequate. Farm infrastructure is an important component of a large herd dairy farm and we must invest in it to have a successful business. Without adequate infrastructure, people, animals and the environment suffer which ultimately means that the NZ dairy industry suffers.

There has been a large increase in the numbers of immigrants on farms. They have a valuable role to play but we don't believe we are getting the best out of these people. There are cultural impacts, language barriers, issues of knowledge retention, training and the questionable value of sending people to AglITO who don't have a good enough understanding of English. We need to address this – it really comes back to the people management skills again.

Large herds are big business. They are multi-million dollar operations and need to be set up as such. They require good infrastructure, leadership, management, financials, plans and operations. A good working environment for cows and people is fundamental to a good large herds business – and it's our responsibility to provide it.

Sustainability. Many people interviewed believed that we are not farming in a sustainable way and if we don't address this urgently, we are going to be in real trouble.

#### One of the biggest concerns that came out of the survey:

The status of the animal on large herd dairy farms is not high enough. Large herd dairying is taken as an excuse for not being able to keep focus on the individual cow. Too many people working in the industry don't understand the impacts their actions have on the animal, nor in fact do they understand the needs of the animals with which they work.