

Make your advisory team more effective¹

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Everyone has a unique set of expertise, skills and talents like -- accounting, animal health, finance, people management, and managerial experience. Likewise, everyone has a unique set of weaknesses, areas where they are less knowledgeable. Successful business people surround themselves with different people who have skills to compensate for their weaknesses. Together they are more effective than apart. In their book Wisdom of Teams, Kazenbach and Smith define a team as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”

This definition fits the contemporary dairy advisory team concept; that is, a team that meets together on a regular basis with a shared purpose for a specific dairy operation. The advisory team is generally made up of one or several owners/managers of the dairy along with several advisors. It takes time for a team to learn to work together; teams members need to develop an understanding of each other and create an atmosphere of trust before they can be successful. Traditional dairy advisory teams may focus on increasing profits by targeting specific areas of the dairy to make changes. The goals that are set may be short-term and can be accomplished within a reasonable time frame. For many purposes, these traditional advisory teams work well, but for some dairies other non-traditional teams are needed. This article details three examples of non-traditional teams: subteams, modified board of directors, and virtual teams.

Subteams

For some advisory teams, trying to focus on multiple challenges or areas of concern simultaneously leads to gridlock where nothing gets done. Subteams of individuals may be used to help break this gridlock and move the whole team forward. If the advisory team has goals of improving reproductive efficiency, forage quality, profitability, and milk quality all in the same timeframe, the whole team may be overwhelmed. If the veterinarian leads a subteam of the herd manager and one or two key employees, then they can take the goals set by the advisory team and work out a plan to start making changes needed to improve reproduction.

Subteams may also be developed for each enterprise of the dairy especially if key individuals are not a part of the main team. For example, a subteam for heifers that should include the contracted heifer grower, or a crops subteam with the nutritionist and crops specialist working together to grow the crops and manage the nutrients that best support the cows and utilize the available ground. The subteam may only meet once or twice a year but makes the advisory team more efficient by focusing specific talents on timely tasks. It is important the subteam work towards the goals established by the team and establishes a system for reporting to the team.

In dairy advisory teams with smaller farms, the same concept of subteams can be used with the owner/manager meeting with one key advisor and bringing those results back to the whole team to keep the entire team

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informed and to use them as a clearing house for long range plans. The use of subteams for short-term goals can help the advisory team focus on more long-range planning.

Modified Board of Director Teams

For some advisory teams, their focus is more strategic in nature rather than short-term improvements. Expanding the advisory team to a larger more inclusive group and meeting less frequently helps the dairy producer use this team as a modified board of directors. The producer acts as chairman of the advisory board, but unlike a true board of directors this group provides advice only and the dairy owner not the board, makes the final decisions. The benefit of this type of team is that the owner gets not only an abundance of unique ideas but also some analysis of those ideas from a wide variety of experts, helping the owner to make the best possible strategic decisions.

Experts for this type of team may be geographically dispersed, so meetings are often longer and less frequent than with traditional advisory teams. One or more consultants with similar or complimentary areas of expertise may be used on this type of team. For example, an accountant, financial planner and a lender may all be focused on the financial aspects of the business, but offer different perspectives and serve different purposes on the team. The accountant may provide the financial data in a workable form; the financial planner may provide some critical analysis of the financial position and offer options for long-term decisions; and the lender may provide some insight as to feasibility of those various long-term options. Others on the team bring information about their specific area of expertise as well as their personal experience with other dairies. In this board of director approach, the team may have seven to twelve members rather than the more typical four to six members.

Virtual teams

For some advisory teams, key people are not able to be present at team meetings. Those team members may be located too far from the dairy to make regular team meetings practical or cost-effective. Use of expert advisors may mean working around their very hectic schedules or having them attend only some of the team meetings. Another solution to scheduling challenges is the creation of a virtual or distributed team. A virtual team is one where a member or several members are not physically located with the rest of the team. They usually interact electronically (telephone conference call, Internet connection, etc.). In some cases, a consultant may make only one or two visits per year to the dairy but access data remotely and provide reports to the local advisory team or meet with the team electronically. It is the unique combinations of talented people that make the team work well, but virtual teams require a bit more effort on everyone's part to make the team successful. The downside to being "virtually" on the team is feeling isolated and not part of the team. Some quick tips to overcome this isolation are:

1. Have everyone together at the first meeting.
2. Take a picture of "the team" with all of its members and make copies for everyone.
3. Make certain that everyone on the team has all of the information for each meeting and that everyone on the team participates.



DAIRY ADVISORY TEAMS

All teams, but especially virtual teams, work best when everyone has a stake in the outcome. Virtual teams in non-dairy businesses may consist of employees who work for the same company but are located in different states or different countries. They are committed to the team and to its outcomes because they have something to gain by participating. That “something” may be recognition, opportunity for promotion or monetary compensation for achieving team goals.

Making teams win-win

If dairy producers want the best advisors on the team, then they too need to make certain that everyone has a stake in the outcome. For some local advisors their stake in the team may be based on products or services sold. For other advisors, both local and distant, their stake in the outcome needs to be insured with an hourly fee or consultation fee. Our best advisor’s time is very valuable and if producers want the best service they may need to consider paying more and expecting more in return. What type of dollar investment in advisors would it be worth to: Lower your feed cost? Reduce your employee turnover? Increase your return on investment? If you are wondering whether virtual teams can work and are worth the extra effort and cost, consider this: The New Zealand Dairy Board uses virtual, multicultural teams at the center of their organization, the same organization that sold \$40 million worth of mozzarella to the world’s largest pizza chain, Pizza Hut.

Dairies assemble the best quality feedstuffs at the best possible price from a combination of local and remote sources. Dairy products travel far and wide depending on market, demand, price, etc. Funds are transferred electronically to do business every day. When assembling an advisory team, whether traditional or non-traditional, think about managing your INFORMATION supply chain. What information and advice do you need to make the best possible decisions? Who will supply that information and advice? How will you assemble your team to meet your goals and expectations? What will it cost and what will the return be on that investment? By dividing up the work among team members, you can multiply the results of the team. With teams: Together Everyone Achieves More.