

# Motivating On-Farm Change

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## ■ Take Home Messages

- Communication is one of the fundamental elements of a successful dairy business.
  - Prioritize communication and commit to being open, trustworthy, and transparent.
- Too often we assume that the best way to influence someone is by simply educating them.
  - We assume that once we provide someone with the information they will apply it in a rational way.
- We can be better influencers if we focus on understanding someone's mindset (e.g. attitudes, beliefs, values, etc.).
  - If we understand what someone knows and thinks, we can have a more appropriate discussion about how to change.
- Some of the best ways to motivate staff are through training and continuing education, goal setting, and recognition.
  - These practices help to develop your staff, allow them to have a voice, and ensure staff know they are valued.

## ■ Introduction

I think most would agree that having a good team is one of the keys to success in business. Whether you're running a law firm, building a new start up tech company, or running a dairy farm, the one commonality you can bet on is the need for an effective group of individuals that are skilled, hard-working, and motivated to get the job done. Sounds great, right? It's usually easier said than done though.

So how do we get there? It's all about communication. The first step in ensuring that your farm and staff are operating efficiently is to focus on the communication methods you use. Communication plays a major role in employer-employee relationships on farms and is a key factor to your farms success. It also affects the relationships among family members on the

management team. Good communication ensures you can successfully address issues of discipline, training, motivation, and implementing a new technology or practice.

Having an effective team takes commitment and a solid understanding of both your needs and your team's. Ultimately, this starts with asking questions of yourself, exploring your own mindset towards on-farm decisions. You must then start to explore the mindset of those you work with. It's not rocket science, but it does take time and effort to get it right. It's all about understanding the knowledge, attitudes, and assumptions each of you bring to a given problem and communicating to make sure the actions you take align with your goals.

## **Objectives**

The first objective of this manuscript is to explore some of the key factors influencing on-farm behaviour, specifically highlighting the role of communication and mindset. The second objective is to review some of the qualities and practices that effective managers possess to motivate change.

### **■ Factors Influencing Behavioural Decisions**

Simply put, change is difficult. Whether you're trying to make a change in your personal life or trying to introduce change to a specific management practice, strategy, or routine, changing behaviour is both challenging and complex. In many cases there are factors that you can control, and others you can't. This section will review some of these factors and explore their influence on on-farm behaviour and decision-making.

### **The Role of Knowledge and Awareness**

When it comes to influencing someone to change their behaviour, one of the most common approaches is to educate or provide information. We often take the stance that educating someone will be the driver of change. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we tend to make the assumption that the reason someone isn't doing things a certain way is because they don't know the beneficial reasons behind it, and that if we provide them with the information on what to do, they will take that knowledge and directly apply it in a rational way.

But think about it, is knowledge really the limiting factor for most people? Most individuals find introducing change, particularly health related behaviours, to their own lives difficult – and this is rarely because they don't know “what” to do. Think about smoking, eating healthy, sneezing into your arm. Most of us “know” what to do, yet we still engage in unhealthy behaviours or don't

routinely practice healthier behaviours. Now apply this same thinking to farm-related tasks, such as biosecurity or udder health practices.

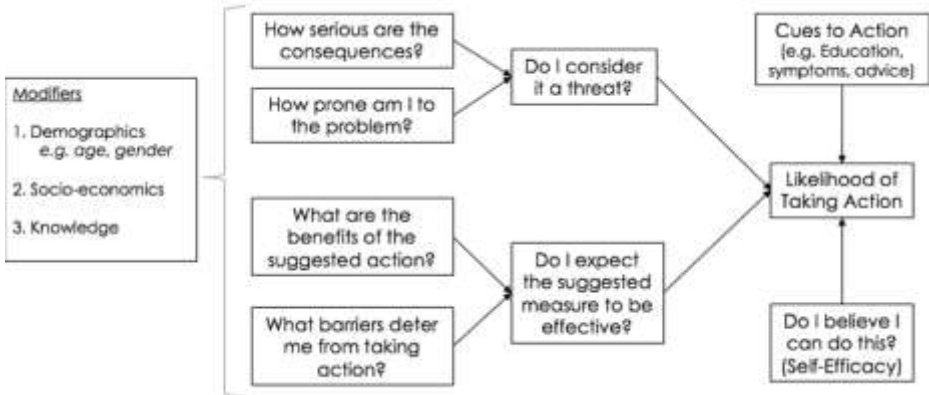
Change is difficult and complex, and most importantly, not solely governed by knowledge. There is a discrepancy between knowledge of a given practice and the actual level of implementation. This discrepancy is a well-known phenomenon (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999) and presents challenges when trying to influence on-farm change. Most importantly, if we provide information when it's seemingly not needed, it is often perceived as nagging, rather than educating, which often leads to a negative reaction from those we're trying to influence.

This is an important principle to understand when managing people and trying to influence change. Yes, knowledge and awareness of a given practice are important pieces of the puzzle, but they are only a small piece – a small piece that is often overlooked by agricultural extension specialist, researchers, and veterinarians. Traditionally, these groups were taught that agriculture was an activity executed by an individual farmer, based primarily on rational, technical, and economic considerations (Leeuwis, 2004; Burton, 2004). But, of course, we know that decisions are not solely made on these bases.

### **It's All About Mindset**

Again, while knowledge and awareness play an important role in farm management, we have learned that on-farm decision making is governed by many other important social factors. A person's attitudes, beliefs, values, skills, personality, habits, and perceived ability to perform a given task (otherwise known as "self efficacy") all influence one's decision-making. These factors are often summarized as an individual's "mindset" (Jansen & Lam, 2012).

So how do we package these factors up in a meaningful way? A useful framework that can be applied to farm decisions is called the Health Belief Model (HBM) (Janz & Becker, 1984; Garcia & Mann, 2003). The idea is that when someone considers making a change, they consider (sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously) several questions. The answers to those questions determine whether they will make a change or not. Figure 1 summarizes the HBM questions and highlights a few additional factors that influence the likelihood of taking action (i.e. cues to action [e.g. external signals or attempts to influence you, such as a media campaign or veterinary advice] and modifiers [e.g. unique personal factors that will influence each person's perspective on the issue]).



**Figure 1: The Health Belief Model; a framework used to describe the factors influencing the likelihood of someone taking action.**

To put this in perspective, let's look at the case of adding more bedding to help reduce hock injuries. Based on the HBM, a producer is most likely to adopt this change if:

- a) they believe their cattle are at risk of having hock injuries,
- b) they believe that a high number of hock injuries in the herd is serious and the consequences of these injuries are undesirable,
- c) the risk of injuries will be reduced by adding more bedding,
- d) the benefit of having fewer hock injuries will outweigh the cost (both real and perceived) of adding more bedding, and
- e) they are confident that they can integrate this practice into their routine

That's a lot to consider! The point being, we need to understand someone's mindset towards a given issue or action before we go ahead and recommend or expect a change. So let's go ahead and look at how we can better understand someone's mindset and what we can do about it.

## Communication and Mindset

Understanding mindset is all about communication. As managers and decision-makers you need to be open about what you do and why you do it. Your staff need to understand your mindset.

But it's not enough to simply convey your mindset to your staff, you also need to explore theirs. What do they think? What are their opinions and beliefs? What are their experiences?

Are you asking these questions of your staff?

Good managers ask open-ended questions (questions that don't end in a yes/no answer) and actively listen to responses. It's useful to ask questions that start with one of the 5 W's and H (who, what, where, when, why, how), which almost always result in someone having to explain their answer rather than just give a simple "yes" or "no" response. The idea is to get them talking and start to understand their mindset. Once you understand where things differ, you can start to discuss those specific issues and get on the same page.

It's important to note that communication doesn't just have value when it comes to understanding mindset, it also helps to build trusting relationships. As managers, keeping the lines of communication open helps show your staff that you value their opinion and you're open to discussing new ideas. Research has shown that staff value managers who demonstrate these qualities over and above other elements of the job, such as job security and flexible hours (Kolstrup, 2012). In fact, research has shown that employee engagement and satisfaction are higher among those who believe their manager is goal-oriented and trustworthy (Cho & Perry, 2011).

Open communication also makes it easier to deal with conflict. It's important not to duck conflict, but to deal with it directly. A calm and considerate approach is often the one that leads to a fair resolution, and while not always easy, open communication often makes dealing with conflict more manageable.

## ■ From Mindset to Motivation

With better two-way communication between you and your staff (remember, this goes for working with your farm advisors as well!), and a better understanding of mindset, you can work on other managerial qualities that help to motivate on-farm change. Key ones worth discussing include: training and continuing education, goal setting, and recognition.

### **Training and Continuing Education**

Proper training is essential for any staff member to perform their duties adequately. Training allows you to describe your approach to staff, and presents a perfect opportunity to get them to understand your mindset. It's not just about showing them how to perform a given task, it's about having them understand why it's done, and done your specific way. Use these opportunities to re-evaluate your methods, and provide opportunities for your staff to ask questions, and offer ideas and alternative approaches. Most importantly, use training opportunities to define roles and set expectations.

Create and communicate clear expectations of the job and what is required to successfully perform it.

Importantly, training shouldn't be viewed as a one-time thing. As new technologies become available, new science and ways of thinking are uncovered, and new problems arise, routine training and continuing education become paramount. Research has shown that education and training not only enhances farmers' ability to make successful changes to their management practices, but it also increases their willingness to do so (Kilpatric, 2000). Giving your staff continuing education opportunities also shows that you value them, you're investing in the success of your operation through them. These efforts have tangible value in not only helping to improve the efficiency of your operation, but also in staff engagement, motivation, and satisfaction.

## **Goal Setting**

One of the best ways to engage and motivate your staff is to involve them in setting goals for themselves and your operation. Effective managers motivate their staff by creating an environment where the team works toward a predetermined goal or goals (Cho & Perry, 2011). Your job is to identify goals and focus your staff to work towards them.

The best place to start is with a brainstorming session, where everyone's thoughts and ideas are given equal value and consideration. Take this opportunity to hear the perspectives of your staff and re-think where your operation is currently. It's useful to track these ideas on a sheet of paper or chart paper. Then you and your team can work on prioritizing, identifying, and refining specific goals.

Once you've chosen a few of your top goals, set out to make them S.M.A.R.T: Specific, Measureable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-bound. This helps to ensure your goals are clear and focused. Goals such as "improving production", or "reducing disease" are too broad. What specifically will you achieve and what specific steps will you take to get there? Most importantly, how will you know when you get there?

"SMART" goals help you articulate what you are striving for and how you'll get there. When it comes to planning, start simple and chunk it out. What's the first action you need to take? The old adage "how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time" rings true here. Achieving your goals may take time and may require the achievement of several smaller tasks to get there. Be sure to stay positive and use these smaller steps to help identify measures of progress.

## Recognition

Feedback from supervisors is routinely identified as one of the most important motivators for staff (Kolstrup, 2012). In fact, research has shown that staff recognition and achievement are not only the most frequent motivators, they also tend to have the longest impact on job satisfaction (Cho & Perry, 2011). Recognition doesn't have to be in the form of monetary incentive programs or tangible rewards. In fact, more money doesn't tend to equate to increased motivation and productivity (Cho & Perry, 2011). Recognition of a job well done or an appreciative remark ("thank you") can go a long way, and takes almost no effort at all. Feedback doesn't always have to be positive either, it just needs to be constructive. Taking the time to recognize someone's effort (even if misguided) should be your first priority. Then you can discuss the potential corrective measures you'd like to see put in place. Again, it's all about open communication and building a trusting relationship.

## ■ Conclusion

Motivating staff and effective on-farm change happen when we understand one another's mindset. They require open communication and a commitment to staff. Training and continuing education, goal setting, and recognition are some of the best ways to help motivate your staff, and are a key part of successful dairy operations.

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