

## DAIRY ADVISORY TEAMS

### Many Farms Could Benefit from an Advisory Team

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*Not just for big dairies, advisory teams help identify problems and prepare strategies for improving margins.*

The dairy business is more complex than most like sized businesses. New production tools, new regulations, new science, growing herd sizes, new diseases, and shrinking margins continue to make dairy production more challenging each year.

Today, more than ever before, off farm expert help must be tapped to provide the new skills, abilities and knowledge to keep individual dairy farms viable. Successful large herds have tapped into paid off-farm expertise effectively for some time. They hire expert consultants from across the country and are often the earliest adopters of the newest profitable technology. This access to new technology and advice gives them a competitive edge.

Simply purchasing new technology and adding more resources to a farm is an overly simplistic approach to a complex dairy management concern. Before a new technology is put into practice it often must be tailored to the unique facility and people constraints of an individual farm. Most producers cannot justify the cost of outside experts to aid this process.

There is an alternative solution and many progressive dairy producers have found it profitable and satisfying. By selecting and organizing their local farm advisors into advisory team process they have discovered a new tool – dairy advisory teams. Simply put, Dairy Advisory Teams divide the work and multiply the results.

This article is the first in a five part series that will discuss the *what, why, who, how* and *when* types of questions about putting an advisory team to work on your farm. Five years of research and experience organizing dairy advisory teams across the state of Pennsylvania has motivated us to reach out to producers who have not heard or used a team in their business. Our goal for you is to use this series as a guide to start a team of your own.

#### **What's the goal?**

What does an advisory team do? First through discussion and brainstorming, it identifies a small number of critical farm challenges. Next, it generates new ideas to address these challenges. Then, the dairy advisory team formulates goals and action plans seeking to improve profitability. In the process, the team members achieve a new optimistic vision for the dairy business they are working with and for the dairy industry.

Producers decide who will be on their teams. Teams often include veterinarians, lenders, nutritionists, cooperative fieldpersons, accountants, partners, experienced producers, consultants, and farm business management experts. Some producers have a three- to eight-person advisory team, and a rare few have subteams of two to three people to handle specialized topics such as herd health, nutrition and finance.



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The purpose of advisory teams is to: Motivate, develop a realistic vision, share information, establish a focus, and meet deadlines. Alone, a producer can think that his/her business situation is stagnant or going backwards. More things are wrong than right. The future appears bleak.

Working with advisory teams brings about change and successes that make everyone involved feel positive and *motivated* about their business. When all advisors know the owner's goals and values they can work together toward those goals. When information is not *shared*, advisors are forced to fall back to personal or perceived goals. With valuable managerial time in demand it is important to *focus* that time on the most critical management challenges.

The task may be to cut the hay but it may be more important to have the manpower and equipment to get all the hay harvested in a narrow window of time rather than start cutting tomorrow. Again, managerial time is valuable. Having an action plan with *deadlines* focuses key people on critical responsibilities and improves the likelihood that things will get done faster.

Who and how many should be on the team? All producers have key people they consult with when faced with management challenges. Defining problems for numerous advisors and consulting with various people often wastes time and results in conflicting advice depending on the perspective of the advisor.

On the other hand, all people that walk on the farm to provide a service or sell products have valuable knowledge that they wish to share with the producer. Most of these want to save everyone's time, keep the decision-making in the hands of the producer, and gain the producer's confidence. They want the producer to be successful so that they continue as clients in the future.

They know what has and hasn't worked on neighboring farms. They know how to modify new procedures to fit unique farm situations. They simply have more experience and insight with new technologies and processes than an individual producer working alone.

There is no right or wrong person for an advisory team. Diversity of knowledge and ability is key. Generally, most of the team is selected from the advisors that are already in place for the farm. One of the off-farm advisors should be asked to be part of the team and act as the facilitator or coordinator. Primarily, the coordinator needs people and organizational skills. Secondly, the coordinator may have ag production technical skills but this is not essential.

Consider the list below when screening your likely team participants. Next shorten the list to only those that are essential to the current business challenges and dilemmas. In addition, the farm should, in most situations, have two representatives on the team – husband and wife, father and son, partners, owner and herdsman, etc.

- Lender
- Veterinarian
- Nutritionist
- Accountant
- Extension Educator



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- A.I. representative
- Milk plant representative
- Crop Consultant
- Another dairy producer

In general, small farms are successful with 3 to 5 team participants, larger farms may benefit from 5 to 7 participants, and occasionally the largest farm may have a larger advisory team with several smaller subteams. Teams meet monthly or more frequently to start, then meet as often as needed to monitor the newly formed strategy.

People who are good “team players” make the best team members. A good team member is concerned about the team outcome, committed to team goals, willing and able to listen, eager to work on teams, and able to offer challenging ideas.

People who should not be on the team include those that: are concerned only about their own area of expertise, dominate conversation, know it alls, committed to personal goals rather than forming team goals, and do not like or value working as a team. Not everyone has the skills or likes being part of a team. If one member is not committed and undermines the team, then it is better to replace that member.

If the producer values that person’s advice or service, then the one-on-one relationship can continue outside of the team. Teams do not work for all farms. Similarly, teams do not work for all people. Everyone has different strengths and interests.

## **Owner is in control...**

One question that dairy producers frequently ask about advisory teams is “Who is in control of my farm?” The answer is the producer/owner is always in control. The team works for the producer. The producer decides who is on the team, who is coordinator, the agenda, the priorities, and controls the farm resources. The team only analyzes problems and opportunities and shares its experiences from other farms.

The role of the team is to provide new options while discussing advantages and disadvantages of each option. The role of the producer is to provide farm specific information, evaluate the input from the team efficiently, and make decisions. The team has the responsibility to respect the producer’s values, goals, and decisions and to work diligently to achieve the team’s goals. The producer has the responsibility to follow through with implementation and to help achieve the team’s goals.

The advantage of advisory teams stems from the multiple head principle. We all see a problem and its solution differently. We all have different experiences to draw from. For example, a producer sees a lame cow and thinks of calling the hoof trimmer, the nutritionist wants to review the ration, the veterinarian wants to consider foot baths or medication for the infection, and the engineer want to improve the concrete surface and the walkways in the barn. The final solution may involve facets of all the above to correct the problem long term.

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