



PENNSYLVANIA

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# DAIRY ADVISORY TEAMS

## Dairy Advisory Teams Work for Them

*Shelly Hershey and Dr. Larry Hutchinson, The Pennsylvania State University*

*Finding novel solutions to critical challenges that improve profitability, satisfaction, and lifestyle.*

Producers are adding advisory teams to their dairy business toolbox at an accelerating rate. The increasing complexities of running a progressive dairy operation require more help from more off-farm advisors working together. Off-farm advisors bring vital experiences from other successful farms to the problem solving process on individual farms. To maximize team potential, teams must meet together and hear the input of everyone to tailor-make a best solution for the individual farm. Teams increase the rate of farm improvement.

Having a team focuses advisors and workers on a few key issues and greatly improves attitudes, confidence, and cooperation. Comfort level among participants along with trust and understanding are essential elements for advisors to work together effectively, all of which are fostered by frequent productive meetings. There may be many different reasons why a producer decides to start a team, but the bottom line is that teams help the producer achieve success.

In this Round Table, we asked four dairy producers to share their team stories. We hope that you are inspired by their experiences and will talk with your consultants about starting a team of your own.

### *How did you hear about teams or decide to have a team?*

**Commerer:** My nutritionist, Scott Hodgson of Cumberland Valley Cooperative suggested that I start a team for my dairy farm business. I was planning a herd expansion and purchasing the farm from my grandparents all at the same time. I started my team through the Dairy Advisory Team program at Penn State University in 1997 and we still continue to meet.

**Wilhide:** We met Brad Hilty, formerly of University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, at a Renaissance Nutrition & Monsanto sponsored farm tour. We were in the process of refinancing our farm, and solicited his consulting advice. Mr. Hilty thought that this would be a fitting time to start a team for our business and helped us set our team in motion.

**Mains:** The Penn State Dairy Advisory Team program leaders presented the concept to me. The program required that we hold team meetings for one year. After one year, we had the option of continuing to meet or disband. We definitely saw results our first year and have continued to meet.

**Miller:** Enos Tice, our nutritionist from Milkin' Menus works with teams in our county. Mr. Tice is a trained team coordinator and presented the team concept to us. We were a part of the Dairy Advisory Team program at Penn State University to get started and now we meet independently.



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## *Who is on your team?*

### **Commerer:**

- Wayne Brubaker- accountant, PA Farm Bureau-MSA Business services, Shippensburg, PA
- Steve Cramer- banker, F&M Trust, Chambersburg, PA
- Scott Hodgson- nutritionist, Cumberland Valley Cooperative, Shippensburg, PA
- Dr. Trent Lartz- veterinarian, Central Valley Veterinary Hospital, Shippensburg, PA
- Bobby and Maxine Commerer- Owners

### **Wilhide:**

- Mike Bell- extension educator, University of Maryland, College Park, MD
- Dr. Donald Carman- veterinarian, Piney Creek Veterinary Clinic, Taneytown, MD
- Hugh Engel- vice president/manager, Farmers and Mechanics Bank, Union Bridge, MD
- Brad Hilty- Penn State Dairy Alliance and Dairy Business Consultant, Carlisle, PA
- Steve Matthias- nutritionist, Agway, Westminster, MD
- Jerry Stoner- agronomist, Southern States (attends one meeting each year)
- Myron, Joyce and Richard Wildhide (Owners)
- Any other invited guests

### **Mains**

- Jeff Brose- consultant, Monsanto Dairy Business, Chambersburg, PA
- Ray Halteman- nutritionist, Agri-King, Newburg, PA
- Bill Heald- advisor, Penn State University, University Park, PA
- Mike Hosterman- banker, AgChoice Farm Credit, Chambersburg, PA
- Dr. Bob Stoltzfus- veterinarian, Lancaster Veterinary Associates, Columbia, PA
- Will McAnliss- herd manager
- Dan and Francis Mains- corporate partners

### **Miller**

- Bob Brown- advisor, Retired PSU Extension Agent, Somerset, PA
- Mike Carr- banker, Somerset Trust, Somerset, PA
- Larry Ogline- accountant, Ogline & Black, Boswell, PA
- Bob Taylor- consultant, Dairy Detail Management, Friedens, PA
- Enos Tice- nutritionist, Milkin' Menus, Salisbury, PA
- Dr. Steve Triol- veterinarian, Animal Medical Center of Somerset, Somerset, PA
- Ben Miller (son)
- Mark and Martha Miller- Owners

\* Note: These four teams are larger than many teams in Pennsylvania. In most cases, producers have a 3-5 person advisory team.

## *What are some of your team goals?*

**Commerer:** Our first goal is to increase production to at least 70 pounds and then maintain that average. In order to see production increase, we need to make our cows more comfortable. We have a plan in place to



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renovate the freestalls and install mattresses. Our long-term goal is to build new facilities and double the herd size within five years. My advisory team will be especially helpful during this planning and transition process.

**Wilhide:** First and foremost, our goal is to keep our operation profitable so that the next generation can come back to the farm. At the same time, we want to make sure that we allow time for our families and leisure activities. We desire to operate efficiently, to keep up with change. Change is so rapid and we realize that if we do not keep up, we will lose out on new opportunities. We are also working on our reproductive performance, improving cow comfort, and our cropping program.

**Mains:** We make our goals as specific as possible. One of our goals is maintain 590 cows (520 milking) in the herd. We would like to achieve a cull rate of  $\leq 36\%$ . As far as production, we are striving for 80 pounds/cow/day or 85 pounds standardized 150-day milk. We are also monitoring our peak milk lactation weights. Our goal is to have first lactation heifers producing 81 pounds of milk, 2<sup>nd</sup> lactation cows producing 105 pounds and 3+ lactation cows producing 115 pounds. Our reproductive goal is to lower days to first service to 70-75 days. Another one of our goals is to increase income/feed cost to \$2000/head/year.

**Miller:** At every team meeting we look at our financial indicators and performance indicators. From these reports we set our team goals. Two of our current goals are to decrease the incidence of retained placentas to  $<5\%$  and to lower our Somatic Cell count to  $<150,000$ . We are also in the process of putting together a yearly cropping plan. One goal that we feel very strongly about is communication. Keeping our veterinarian and nutritionist talking together will increase the likelihood that other goals will be achieved.

### *What are some of the team successes?*

**Commerer:** We have increased efficiency in many areas of the dairy. We began using a custom heifer raiser. This has reduced our cost of raising replacements and given us time to concentrate on our milking herd. Another time saver has been hiring a custom operator to chop our forages. The timely manner in which the custom operator harvests our forages also improved nutrition. We recently installed more fans and open trough waterers in our freestall barn. To allow for more ventilation, we removed the tin from the ends of the barns.

**Wilhide:** We made many changes as a result of our advisory team. As a result, we have had many successes as well. We are now using a custom operator to harvest our corn silage. Using the custom operator took care of the need to buy new equipment, so we were able to build bunker silos. It takes the custom operator about 3-4 days to fill the bunker silos. It took us about 5 weeks to do the same job. We addressed cow comfort in a big way. We rebuilt our freestalls, installed new stall mats with fiber coating, and hung more fans. In fact, we just received another shipment of fans in today. We initiated a new feeding schedule to address our problem of timely feeding. We are using a contract heifer grower and using the old heifer facilities for our fresh cow group. Due to the heifer grower's herd health protocol, we have improved our herd health on our farm as well. One of our most recent successes was separating out our first calf heifers. We have seen noticeable changes in production and overall health.

**Mains:** Our team had significant input into the newly constructed pre-fresh barn. It was much easier for our lender to understand and justify the importance of this new facility. We now have a protocol in place for our dry cows and a milking SOP written for our employees. We changed our feeding program to lower our feed costs by buying individual commodities instead of a custom mix. We also conducted a Posilac trial on our herd and initiated management changes based on the outcomes.

**Miller:** We achieved the Maryland/Virginia milk quality premium. This is a result of our written standard operating procedures for the milking parlor. When employees finish reading the SOP, they get quizzed. Our



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communication has also very much improved. We take pride in the success that we have had so we set aside time to celebrate them. We have ice cream parties for our team, family, friends and neighbors who help out in any way on the farm. We also treat our employees to dinner as a way of showing our appreciation to them.

### *How often does your team meet?*

**Commerer:** We have team meetings every month for 1-2 hours.

**Wildhide:** We meet monthly for 2 hours, except for the month of May. We concentrate on planting during the month of May.

**Mains:** Our team meets every 4-6 weeks for 2 or more hours. One hour is not long enough, especially for those consultants that travel long distances to come to our meetings.

**Miller:** We meet for two hours every quarter. We typically do not meet during the month of May. When we first started our team, we met monthly. After the team was established and team members were comfortable with each other, we started meeting quarterly.

### *Where does your team meet?*

**Commerer:** We meet here at the farmhouse.

**Wilhide:** We meet in the farm office where we have access to all of our production and financial data.

**Mains:** Our team meets at a local restaurant. We find that there are too many interruptions at the farm office and farmhouse. Meeting at a restaurant also gives us an opportunity to talk informally over lunch before the meeting starts.

**Miller:** We meet around our table at our house.

### *How did you choose your team coordinator?*

**Commerer:** Scott Hodgson, our nutritionist, who presented the team concept to us, volunteered to be our coordinator. Mr. Hodgson works with several teams and had specialized training through the Penn State Dairy Advisory Team program.

**Wilhide:** Brad Hilty offered to be our coordinator. He focuses our team and keeps us on track. We stay in touch with Mr. Hilty between team meetings as well. We also work together to make the meeting agenda.

**Mains:** We appointed a team coordinator from the members that we asked to be on our team. Ray Halteman, our nutritionist, facilitates our meetings. He guides us through the meeting by identifying our challenges and then working us through the action planning process.

**Miller:** Enos Tice, our nutritionist volunteered to be our coordinator. By allowing him to lead our team, I am able to concentrate on what my team members are suggesting and it makes decision making easier.

### *What has been the “cost” and “benefits” of your team in terms of time and money?*

**Commerer:** We pay two of our team members for their time to participate on our team. There is also a time commitment on my part, but I know that it is time well spent and that there will be payoff.

**Wilhide:** Our team really doesn't save me any time but it keeps me organized, just like my computer- it doesn't save me any time, but my records are more accurate and usable. We have also learned to plan ahead and to write down our plans and our goals, so that we can refer to them at anytime to see if we are on target.



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**Mains:** The greatest benefit that I see coming from our team is that we now analyze our business on a monthly basis instead of bi-annual basis. Some of our team members are paid and we have offered to pay others. Some members participate in our team in exchange for buying their services or products.

**Miller:** We save money when we spend time on the action plans that come out of our team meeting. Sometimes there is not immediate payoff, but it comes. One example is the time that we spent writing a protocol for breeding. Once the protocol is written and followed, our reproductive performance will improve. We also spent a considerable amount of time on our nutrient management program. By taking the extra time to analyze before we apply nutrients to the soil, we are able to save money.

### *What was one of your team challenges?*

**Commerer:** Our financial consultant accepted another position so we lost a valuable team member. We had to explain the team concept to our new consultant and review our team roles and ground rules.

**Wildhide:** There are so many ideas brought to the table that some may not be feasible right away or need modification to be practical with our current situation. We are constantly challenged to try new things that are different from our “old way” of operating.

**Mains:** We had to reorganize our team after we replaced one team member who was just “not working” or contributing to the team process. It can be difficult when you have to discuss this with that particular team member. We talked to him about the reasons why his participation is no longer contributing to our team’s progress.

**Miller:** Two of our major challenges have been goal setting and keeping our team charged up and motivated.

### *What did you hope to gain from starting a team?*

**Commerer:** I wanted to have all of my consultants on the “same page”. This has especially helped my lender understand my needs when he is informed about all aspects of my business. Our communications skills have greatly improved. With the team process, we can discuss our concerns and have rational discussions around the table. Not only do we discuss, but we come up with solutions to our problems as well.

**Wildhide:** When we first started our team, our goal was to survive through the year. Now we are more than *surviving*, we are *striving* for success. Our team has helped us make this attitude change.

**Mains:** Actually, we were a little skeptical about the team process at first. We thought that the team would meet for 1 or 2 months and then disband. To our pleasant surprise, our team is very committed. They are real team players!

**Miller:** We hoped to gain unity in our operation. We wanted everyone to communicate and work together to solve our challenges and problems. Our team brings a tremendous amount of experience to the table and can help us solve problems that we probably could not solve on our own.

### *What advice would you offer for a dairy producer considering an advisory team?*

**Commerer:** I strongly urge every producer to start a team, especially young or new producers. Your lines of communication will be opened. One piece of advice is to be open and honest with all of the people around the table. Be patient! It takes time to see results. In our case, it took about 1-1 ½ years to see results. Your consultants have a lot of experience that they bring from other farms that they work with. Use them to their fullest potential.



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**Wildhide:** I should have started a team 20 years ago. Without my team, I tend to have tunnel vision. Find a coordinator and team members who want to see you succeed. Your team has to be made of trustworthy people who you can tell your soul to. One on one, people are reserved and issues are hidden, but in a team setting, the issues come out. Be prepared to be challenged and have the right attitude. Keep your mind open and be willing to change. Your team is a great sounding board so don't be afraid to talk to each other, communication is key.

**Mains:** Teams are a time commitment. Make sure that you are prepared for meetings; know what you're going to talk about. Be open-minded and be willing to make changes. Realize that you play a big part in the team's success. When my team makes a decision, I need to implement that decision in a timely manner. It may be as simple as ordering supplies or maybe it's communicating changes in protocols to my employees. I know that my team looked at the problem from all angles, so I can confidently follow through the implementation process. Team members will get discouraged and not move forward if you are not willing to take their suggestions and make changes. Be sure to have your team meeting away from the farm where there are no interruptions.

**Miller:** Choose a skilled coordinator, one that you can work with. Make sure that the team is a win-win experience for everyone. Be open to the opinions of your team members. Be patient with your team, sometimes you don't see results immediately. Most importantly, keep the tone of your meetings positive. Look at the weaknesses and challenges as well as the strengths and accomplishments at all team meetings.

### Farm Descriptions:

#### Locust Grove Farm- Bobby, Maxine and Grant Commerer, Shippensburg, PA

"I strongly urge young dairy producers to start an advisory team." Bobby and Maxine Commerer started their dairy advisory team in the spring of 1998. During the last three years, the team has helped them through two major changes in the business, the farm transfer from Bobby's grandparents and a herd expansion. The Commerer's recently expanded their dairy herd from 115 to 170 cows and plan to double their herd size and build new facilities within 5 years. "My team brings so much experience to the table. There are many dairy farms that have had the same challenges that I face today. I have the benefit of learning from their successes and failures before I jump in with two feet."





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### **Key De Blue Farm- Myron and Richard Wilhide, Keymar, MD**



Myron and Richard are the fifth generation to operate Key De Blue Farm. The dairy advisory team has been in place for 3 years, but the Wilhide's will tell you that they should have started their team 20 years ago. Myron and Richard have seen many successes as a result of teamwork. In terms of cow comfort, freestalls were rebuilt, stall mats installed and fans were put in. They now use a custom grower to raise their replacements and also use a custom operator for harvesting corn silage. This allowed for more space to separate out a 1<sup>st</sup> calf heifer group. They have more time to concentrate on their milking herd and even some leisure time for themselves. They are striving to make their operation run as efficiently as possible. With their optimistic attitude, they will continue to be a profitable operation.

### **Mains Dairy Inc.- Dan Mains and Will McAnliss, Newville, PA**

In 1999, the Mains Dairy Advisory Team met for the first time. Dan was skeptical about the concept at first, feeling like his team would disband after a few meetings, but his team has proved to be very committed and a worthwhile investment for the corporation.

“Within 2 months my team set up a spreadsheet to monitor certain performance indicators. We use this spreadsheet to analyze the business on a monthly basis.” The team has had many successes in the past 3 years and continues to set challenging goals in each area of the business. The Mains own 700 acres and milk 600 cows. They consistently maintain a bulk tank score of 150-200,000 and the herd is averaging 23,588 lbs.





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## MilBro Holsteins- The Miller Family, Boswell, PA



“Communication has been our primary goal. We strive for unity in our operation, keeping everyone informed and working together.” The Miller’s not only have better communication on the farm, but also within their team. They have adopted several ideas suggested by their team including spending more time in the planning process. By putting the pencil to paper, the Millers have written standard operating procedures for the milking parlor, a protocol for reproduction and nutrient management plans. The Miller’s are very conscientious about celebrating successes with employees, neighbors, family, & friends when goals are accomplished. The Miller’s try to keep everyone motivated and feeling like the team is a win-win situation.