

WVS MILK QUALITY

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Beyond the Paycheck: A Dairy Owner's Guide to Retaining Skilled Milkers

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In the dairy industry, your milking crew is the backbone of your operation. They are the frontline defense against mastitis, the gatekeepers of milk quality, and the people who spend the most face-to-face time with your primary asset: your cows.

Yet, dairy farms consistently face high turnover rates. Replacing a skilled milker isn't just a headache; it is an expensive disruption that impacts herd health, milk protocols, and team morale. While competitive wages are necessary to get people through the door, **money alone will not keep them there.**

To retain top-tier milkers, dairy owners must shift from a mindset of "managing labor" to "building a workplace culture." Here is a comprehensive guide to keeping your parlor staffed with experienced, motivated professionals.

1. Optimize the Parlor Environment (Comfort & Safety)

Milking is physically demanding work. It involves repetitive motions, standing on concrete for hours, and working in extreme temperatures or damp conditions. If your parlor is miserable to work in, employees will leave for easier indoor jobs.

- **Prioritize Ergonomics:** Ensure the parlor pit height is correct to prevent chronic back and shoulder strain. Use anti-fatigue rubber mats on the pit floor to reduce stress on legs and joints.
- **Climate Control:** Install heavy-duty fans and misters for the summer months, and efficient pit heaters for the winter. A comfortable milker is a focused milker.
- **Keep Equipment Functional:** Broken detachers, leaky hoses, or erratic vacuum levels frustrate employees and slow them down. Regular maintenance shows your crew that you care about their daily work experience.

2. Standardize Protocols to Reduce Stress

Ambiguity breeds frustration. If a milker isn't sure whether a cow should be treated or turned out, or if different shift managers enforce different rules, the workplace becomes stressful.

- **Visual Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs):** Create clear, highly visual SOPs for prep routines, standard treatments, and post-milking cleanup. Use bilingual signage (e.g., English and Spanish) with clear pictures or color-coding.
- **Consistency Across Shifts:** Ensure that what is expected during the morning shift is exactly the same as the night shift. Consistency creates a predictable, low-stress environment where employees feel confident in their execution.

3. Invest in Proper Training and "The Why"

Nobody likes to feel like a robot repeating a task. When milkers understand the science behind their routine, they take greater ownership of their roles.



Dr. Molly and Dr. Emma have been leading a training program called, VacaDemia, for Spanish speaking employees teaching various topics from milk quality to animal husbandry. They are pictured above with a recent group who completed one of the courses. Bringing in industry specialists can frame your milkers as professionals who care rather than seen just as "laborers." This boosts job pride. Contact the clinic to learn about the next training course being offered at a farm in the area.

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- **Explain "The Why":** Don't just tell a milker to wait 90 seconds after stripping a cow to attach the unit. Explain the biology of oxytocin release, how it affects milk letdown, and how it protects the cow's teat ends.
- **Continuous Education:** Bring in your herd veterinarian or industry specialists for periodic workshops. Framing your milkers as professionals who care for animal welfare — rather than just "laborers" — boosts job pride.

4. Foster Respect and Clear Communication

Language and cultural barriers are common on modern dairies, but they should never be an excuse for poor communication or a lack of respect.

- **Learn the Basics:** If you have non-native English speakers on your crew, take the time to learn key phrases in their native language. It shows immense respect and bridges cultural gaps.
- **Active Listening:** Hold brief, regular check-ins. Ask your milkers: "What is the hardest part of your shift right now?" or "Is there a tool that would make your job easier?" Act on their feedback so they know their voices matter.
- **Zero-Tolerance for Bullying:** Ensure that shift supervisors treat milkers with respect. A toxic middle manager is one of the fastest ways to lose an entire milking crew.

5. Implement Performance-Based Incentives

If milkers pull a perfect shift, keep somatic cell counts (SCC) low, and catch mastitis early, do they get recognized for it? Or do they only hear from management when something goes wrong?

- **Tie Bonuses to Collective Goals:** Create a monthly bonus structure tied to measurable parlor goals, such as maintaining a low bulk tank SCC, minimizing high-linear-score cows, or keeping a low incidence of new mastitis cases.
- **Celebrate Wins:** When the farm hits a quality bonus from the cooperative, share that success. Buy a team lunch, hand out farm-branded gear, or distribute a portion of that bonus directly to the parlor crew.

6. Offer Creative Benefits and Flexibility

Dairy farming is a 365-day-a-year business, making burnout an ever-present threat. Offering flexibility where other farms won't can make you the employer of choice in your region.

- **Predictable Scheduling:** Provide schedules weeks in advance so employees can plan their personal and family lives. Avoid chronic understaffing that forces employees to work unexpected double shifts.
- **Non-Monetary Perks:** Consider providing onsite housing perks, utility assistance, or farm-raised beef. For many families, these tangible benefits add immense value and loyalty to a workplace.

Cut Costs and Boost Efficiency: *Smart Mastitis Strategies for Your Herd*

Updating your mastitis treatment protocols can directly improve your farm's bottom line while protecting consumer trust. At the recent National Mastitis Council Regional Meeting, Dr. Pamela Ruegg from Michigan State University shared how commercial dairies can use smart antibiotic management to drive profitability.

Stop Dumping Profits: Shorten Treatment Windows. The biggest hidden cost of mastitis treatment is discarded milk. Moving away from prolonged treatments can save your operation thousands of dollars annually:

Follow minimum-label durations: Cut routine treatment windows from 5–8 days down to 1–3 days. Longer treatments rarely improve health outcomes.

Save \$15,000 in milk discard: For a herd producing 100 lbs/cow/day and treating 250 cases a year, cutting just 3 days of milk discard saves around \$15,000 annually.

Test before you treat: Non-severe cases that are culture-negative or caused by Gram-negative pathogens often do not require antibiotics. Focus your treatments strictly on Gram-positive infections.

Optimize Dry Cow Therapy by Parity Group. Blanket dry cow therapy may be costing you unnecessary time and money. If your herd has controlled clinical mastitis and a low bulk tank somatic cell count (SCC), switch to Selective Dry Cow Therapy (SDCT).

An algorithm based on no clinical mastitis and an SCC < 200,000 cells/mL shows exactly which cows can safely skip antibiotics at dry-off and receive just a teat sealant instead:

- First lactation: 57% of cows are typically eligible to dry-off without antibiotics.
- Second lactation: 26% of cows are eligible.
- Third or greater lactation: 18% of cows are eligible.

Find Your Bottlenecks in 30 Minutes. Most producers use antibiotics judiciously, but few know how their costs compare to neighboring dairies. You can find hidden savings by using the free, secure Antibiotic Usage Benchmark Tool.

- How it works: Securely upload a CSV file of your farm's treatment records.
 - What you get: A personalized report comparing your actual medication and milk discard costs against minimum-label durations.
 - Time required: It takes less than 30 minutes, and no farm or user identities are required.
- Put your records to work today at <https://dairyantibioticbenchmark.msu.edu>.