

# Communication During Times of Stress

**Julia Nolan Woodruff**, former Extension Educator, Erie County

Volatile prices in the dairy industry are creating critical cash-flow and long-term survivability issues on Ohio's dairy farms. These issues are also likely to be causing significant stress and strain among family members and farm employees. With all that happening on the farm, you may think business and family communication is the least of your concerns. However, open and honest communication is even more important during times of high stress. Communication matters because your farm operation is made up of people, and people feel more comfortable when they know what is happening within the business, even if the news is not good. Good communication can help to build trust, promote understanding, and motivate those involved in the farm, whether they are family or non-family employees.

Withdrawal and lack of communication sends a clear, negative message about the future to employees and family members. It will appear as if management is giving up rather than trying to adjust to meet the challenges before them. Communication is certainly a challenge during difficult times, but if conducted effectively, it can help lead your farm through stressful times.

Communication should not stop at the barn door. By staying in touch with outside advisors, such as your lender, feed and seed dealers, accountant, agronomist, nutritionist, veterinarian, Extension educator, etc., you can gain valuable information to help make decisions concerning your operation. By keeping these lines of communication open, you will build strong relationships with this support group that can be very helpful in times of high stress for your farm.

Communication takes time and effort. It is easy to say "I'll do it tomorrow." However, too often tomorrow comes and goes, and there has still been no effort made to increase communication between management and employees or within the family. Stressful situations make it even more difficult to find time to communicate, as everyone is consumed by working to keep up and worrying about what will or could happen. It is during these times of high stress that it is critical for management to make time to communicate with employees and family members.

One way to find time to communicate with employees and/or family members is to hold a family business meeting. This will provide an opportunity for the manager to provide information about the current situation and for those involved to understand what is happening within the farm business. The group can then discuss the situation and develop an action plan to meet the challenges the farm is facing. The current situation may be bleak, but by communicating, the manager is letting those around him/her know that they value them as a part of the farm team. Other ways to communicate may just be sitting down in the farm office for 10 minutes of uninterrupted time, talking while working together, or scheduling a set time each day to catch up with one another.



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Finally, understand that people communicate differently depending upon their personality characteristics. While some personalities are action-oriented and will want to get all the issues out in the open and get started on solving the problem immediately, others will need more time to understand the issues and then think about the issues before they begin to explore ways to tackle them. It will take an effective manager to recognize the differences in communication styles and adjust accordingly. The important thing to remember is to include employees and family members as much as possible by keeping the lines of communication open.

Communication involves both talking and listening. These components are each discussed in more detail in DIBS# 20-15 and DIBS# 21-15, which are available on-line at <http://dairy.osu.edu>.

## References

Erven, Bernie. 2001. Overcoming barriers to communication. The Ohio State University.  
[http://aede.osu.edu/sites/aede/files/publication\\_files/Overcoming Barriers to Communication.pdf](http://aede.osu.edu/sites/aede/files/publication_files/Overcoming%20Barriers%20to%20Communication.pdf)

Matthews, D. 1994. Family Communication: During times of stress. North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service publication #HE-424.

*Published by OSUE Dairy Working Group, a collaboration of OSU Extension Educators and Specialists. Reviewed in 2015 by: Rory Lewandowski, Extension Educator, Wayne County; Maurice Eastridge, Dairy Extension Specialist, Department of Animal Sciences*

*Factsheet originally published in May 2009, DIBS # 19-09*

---

The College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its academic and research departments including, Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC), Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) and Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to age, ancestry, color, disability, gender identity or expression, genetic information, HIV/AIDS status, military status, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Bruce McPherson, Ph.D., Vice President for Agricultural Administration & Dean

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing, please contact the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences using your preferred communication (e-mail, relay services, or video relay services). Phone 1-800-750-0750 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. EST Monday through Friday. Inform the operator to dial 614-292-6891.

Copyright © 2014, The Ohio State University