

Communication: Listening 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. Communication involves both talking and listening. Listening is more than just hearing the words someone is speaking; it requires staying engaged with the speaker. Active listening is a skill. It can sometimes be difficult to really use this skill. Most speakers say about 125 words per minute, while the typical listener can receive between 400 and 600 words per minute. This extra time can allow listeners to get sidetracked or start thinking ahead to what they are going to say next.

Another barrier to listening is "noise." Noise is all the activity and interruptions going on around the individuals involved in the conversation. There is a lot of noise around a farm, with people and equipment coming and going, cell phones ringing, and many other distractions. Find a time that communication of important topics can be done with as few interruptions and distractions as possible. This is a good time to ask that cell phones be turned off and a set amount of time be dedicated to communication regarding the business and/or family. A regularly scheduled business meeting could help with the noise problem.

The key to good listening is to become an active listener who is prepared to listen. Put aside your own thoughts and focus on what the other person is saying, and what they mean. Avoid giving your opinion or resolution suggestions before the speaker is finished. It is important to hear the entire situation before commenting. Asking questions for clarification is good for communication, but listener judgment of the speaker is not.

Do provide feedback to the speaker by nodding your head to show understanding or asking questions for clarification. Feedback is a critical component to the communication process as it allows the sender to know if the receiver (listener) understands what they are trying to communicate. Feedback makes the conversation two-way rather than just one-way. Make eye contact and lean forward toward the speaker. Becoming an engaged listener takes practice and concentration, but will help to improve communication within the family and the farm.

Many times during periods of high stress, individuals need to share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening. Practicing good listening skills will help encourage employees and family members to increase communication about important issues.

To learn more about improving communication, see DIBS# 20-15 Sending a Message During Times of Stress and DIBS# 19-15 Communication During Times of Stress, which are available on-line at <http://dairy.osu.edu>.

Reference

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)

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

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