

THE WELFARE OF MAN IN FUTURE SCANDINAVIAN DAIRY PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The working conditions for people are a key issue for the future of dairy production in Scandinavia. We can start by asking why it is so hard to attract young people to a future within agriculture and dairy production. If we can change the issues about money, professional pride, belief in the future, leadership, possibilities for personal development and life-long learning, and improve the working conditions - then we will attract attention from the younger generation. To reach this goal joint efforts are necessary. We need support from politicians, authorities, universities, organizations and others. On the farm level we need to modernize leadership and management and we need to offer personal development, life-long learning as well as improved physical working conditions. Even the technical developments, such as automatic milking systems, may help us to reach our goal and enhance the welfare of men and women as well as cows!

KEYWORDS. Dairy production, working conditions, leadership, management

INTRODUCTION

Life on a farm, according to many people living in urban areas, is imagined to be romantic, have good social quality and a small-scale environment, as depicted in many of the children's books by Astrid Lindgren and other authors. However, although farming can have its more positive aspects there is also another picture for those people who take care of the animals and produce milk and other food products. There have been enormous developments during the last decades. In the old days work was often heavy, the work days were long and there were risky work operations with the handling of bulls, horses and poor machinery, but you often had people around to help out and to share your problems with. Today technology has solved many of the heavy and risky work operations occurring on a farm – but many problems still remain and new ones have appeared – often with direct connection to the human aspects of farming and dairy production (Ahonen et al., 1990; Fuller, 1994; van den Top, 1995; Lundqvist et al., 1997). In this paper "large-scale" dairy production has employed farm workers.

The working conditions for the people (men and women, farmers and farm workers, young and old) are a key issue for the future of dairy production in Scandinavia. The Swedish National Labour Market Administration (AMV) has a website (www.ams.se) where you can find information about most jobs in Sweden. The main focus group for the information is young people seeking facts about jobs in the future. If you read about the job as a farm worker in livestock production you will learn that the job is hard, involves heavy lifting, requires people to work in uncomfortable positions, involves being in locations where the air quality may be poor - most frequently in sheds with pigs and poultry, puts people at a risk of developing allergies, often requires people to work during weekends and often requires people to work alone. These are only

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a few of the negative images that are spread around. Moreover, many farmers today are giving their children advice to seek a future elsewhere - not in agriculture.

Why is it so hard to attract young people to a future within agriculture and dairy production?

- Money - most people want an income comparable with other jobs, this is not always the situation in dairy jobs
- Professional pride - people want to be proud of their job and people want to tell others about their job - this is not always the case among people working in the dairy sector
- Belief in the future - people have to feel and believe that their job will be of importance, also in the future - this is not always the case among people working in the dairy sector
- Leadership - people want to have a modern type of leadership and a type of management which also involves them - there are too many dairy farms with very poor leadership and old-fashioned management styles
- Possibilities for personal development and life-long learning - most people want to develop and gain higher competence in their profession - the agricultural sector is at the bottom of the ladder when it comes to further education possibilities for its workers
- Working conditions - people want to stay healthy and come home from work with some energy left - working in agriculture is very dangerous - 20% of all fatal work-related accidents in Sweden occur in agriculture and dairy production is a sector with many injuries, both from accidents and illnesses.

If we want to have a future for dairy production in Scandinavia, then we need to improve the present situation, and here joint efforts are required.

POLITICAL AND STRUCTURAL ACTIONS

The human aspects of agriculture and dairy production are not a major focus among politicians, authorities, research and education or even among the farmers' own organizations. Looking at some Swedish web sites, we can see that:

- The Swedish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (<http://jordbruk.regeringen.se>) has nothing in their organization (with divisions for Food, Plant products, Animal health and welfare, Environment and Rural, Fisheries as well as Sami and education) that shows any interest for human aspects of agriculture
- The Swedish Board of Agriculture (www.sjv.se) present their main fields of action in animal health & welfare; crops, environment & water as well as markets & trade – but with no sign of any interest for the human aspects of agriculture.
- The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (www.slu.se) is presented as a university with a clearly defined role in society: to take responsibility for the development of learning and expertise in areas concerning biological resources and biological production. This responsibility stretches over the wide-ranging fields of agriculture forestry and a the food industry to environmental questions, veterinary medicine and biotechnology, but with no sign of any interest for the human aspects of agriculture,
- The Federation of Swedish Farmers (www.lrf.se) states that LRF's task is to create the conditions for efficient, market oriented and competitive companies. By advancing the economic interest of farmers and developing rural communities, the conditions are also created for promoting and satisfying social and cultural interests. LRF shows that they care about human aspects - but sad to say - they have shut down their previous successful activities within "The Swedish Farmers' Safety and Preventive Health Association".

These important actors in the agricultural sectors have key roles when it comes to questions related to the human aspects of agriculture and dairy productions.

If the aspect of the farmers' and farm workers' working and living conditions were to be integrated into the work of the Ministry of Agriculture, then there would be more "human" decisions and more positive words from the Ministry about the work which is done by all the farmers, their families and the farm workers.

If the Board of Agriculture were to care about the people who work in the agricultural sector, then the evaluation studies of new technologies in animal production would also include human health and welfare and not only animal health and welfare, such as is the case with automatic milking

If the University of Agriculture really cared about the human aspects of agriculture, then all its students would be given training in issues such as working environment, work psychology and leadership. Extensive thematic research programmes would be directed towards working and living conditions and these questions would be integrated into other types of research programmes.

If the Federation of Farmers cared more about the farmers' health, then they would have done more to save "The Farmers' Safety and Preventive Health Association" and they would work harder to promote the human side of farming.

To change the attitudes and beliefs about the future for an entire sector, such as agriculture and dairy production, requires wide support. Shouldn't all major players dealing with agriculture have joint programming for the human aspects of agriculture, such as working and living conditions, health and professional development?

FARM LEVEL ACTIONS

At the farm level, the management can do much. However, it is important to have a holistic view of the working conditions, and an understanding there are many factors that taken together are important for the welfare of men and women in dairy production (Fig. 1).

Leadership / management

Dairy production leadership styles have to be modernized on many farms (Gustafsson and Lundqvist, 1993). It is still very common not only to hear about the old-fashioned names for supervisors in agriculture, but also that these people still exist as in the old days.

The authoritarian manager directs, decides, issues orders and claims to know best about most things, irrespective of the employees' resources, experiences and values. He tends to involve himself in matters large and small because he has no confidence in his employees. The employees' task is to obey their manager. Giving orders is considered more important than allowing for creativity.

Both farmers and employed supervisors need to practice democratic leadership in order to attract the younger generation and to keep the staff from leaving the farm. Work science research also identifies the democratic leader as the most effective managers in general terms (Lennér Axelsson and Thylefors, 1998). Democratic leadership means sharing power and giving employees the chance to influence their own work. Such a leader is confident that his staff are adult, mature, responsible people who possess resources that are useful in the work they do. He makes long-term plans and usually does not change rules or decisions without the matter being thoroughly discussed and motivated in the work group. Prestige has no central position for a democratic leader. He can admit his faults and errors without losing too much self-esteem. This also makes his staff more willing to take risks and a mistake is not a disaster. The tolerance threshold is high. When a manager is appreciated by his staff, they will overlook any failings he may have.

It has also to be concluded that it is not only a question of management style, it is also how you recruit the right people and how to create a good team, introduction of personnel, personal support, information, motivation, handling of criticism, conflicts and other issues.

It might be easy to describe the ideal leader, but it may be hard to create one. Courses for agricultural students in leadership are a good start (Lundqvist, 2000), but there is also a great need

for courses adapted for experienced farmers who need and want to learn about modern management. This is often a request from farmers expanding their dairy operations from a family-sized farm to a large-scale farm with employees. They often say that they have no or very little experience of leadership and that they want to learn how to be a good leader. Courses are now being initiated in Sweden by the Swedish Farm Employers' Federation.

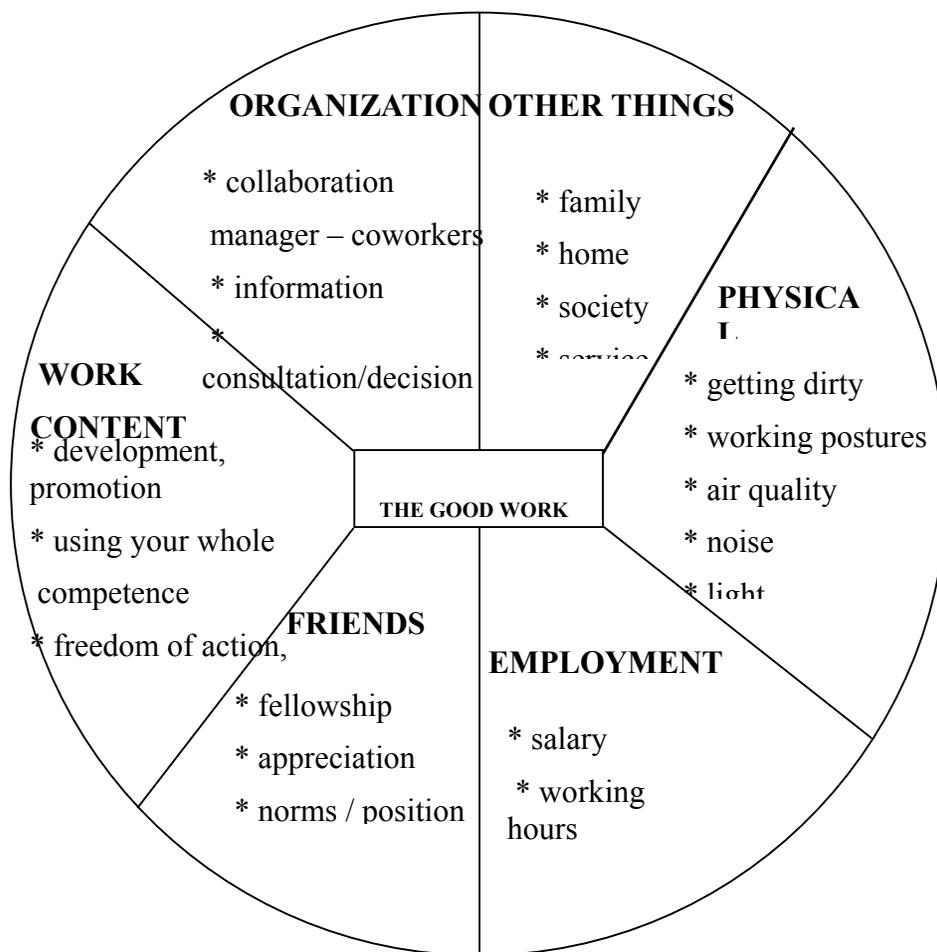


Figure 1. The working environment circle. Source: Lundqvist, 1999.

Personal development and life-long learning

Issues related to personal development and life-long learning are closely related to leadership. As a good manager you support your employees so that they learn more, both through the job and at the work place, but also through external courses. In Sweden, the farmers themselves are quite good at attending different types of courses, seminars and so on. When it comes to the farm workers the situation is not so good. According to a recent report from the Swedish government (Näringsdepartementet, 2001), agriculture and related activities are at the bottom of the list when it comes to further education possibilities for employees. The structural changes are now so big that it has become necessary for the employees as well to gain higher competence through continuous education in different forms. It is not always easy to handle these questions on farms with only a few employees, but there seem to be efforts to try to handle this with parttime courses, distance education via the Internet and other solutions. Increasing the competence among the employees is often seen as good investment for the farm owner and a positive experience for the employee, increasing the self-esteem of the farm worker.

Physical working conditions

The physical working conditions are always an important part for the creation of the good work place. The first EU-study about working conditions showed that agriculture had the highest degree of risks (Paoli, 1992). Other studies have shown that farmers and farm workers are not the only ones who get injured. Every year a number of children get killed or seriously injured on farms in the Scandinavian countries (KSLA, 1997). In dairy production a lot of research has been directed towards the ergonomical problems (Pinzke, 1999; Stål, 1999), but the research has also produced improvements, such as milking-rails, adjustable working-heights in parlours and support arms for milking clusters. Investments in working conditions are often good business, and this has been shown in evaluation studies (Lundqvist, 1996).

A work place that is clean and tidy is a good starting point; it makes most people working there happy – as well as making a good impression to the visitors! Another important part is having nice arrangements for the employees, such as a nice place to eat and a well-equipped changing room with showers, are basic items that a farmer needs to provide to attract good workers. Another way of showing an interest in working conditions is to follow the rules about systematic work environment management (previous called "Internal control") issued by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (2001).

The revolution in dairy production - the automatic milking - brings up many discussion points. From the work science point of view the question about avoiding new risks when it comes to health and safety has been important (Lundqvist, 1992). We still believe that systematic evaluations of the consequences for human health and safety should go hand-in-hand with the evaluations of animal health and welfare. Reports from farmers show that there have been initial problems, and improvements still need to be made, but so far the main impression is that this development will make dairy production less stressful, less risky and much more interesting. Another point is that this new technology might be a good help to give people increased professional pride in their jobs, increase their belief in the future, give them possibilities for development, new skills and hopefully more money in their pockets!

CONCLUSIONS

When we have created good work places in dairy production and have received support for the human aspects from politicians, authorities, universities and other organizations – then there is a chance that young people will start to compete for jobs in the dairy sector! We need joint efforts to get there – media campaigns to promote jobs in agriculture do not change anything – they merely conceal reality for a while!

We need to demonstrate the good examples, such as dairy farms that have good leadership, farm workers who enjoy their jobs and production units that can be shown to consumers - with pride! Our research team is right now working with a project on large-scale milk-production (Lundqvist et al., 2000) and we hope that our results will help to create improved welfare for men and women as well as cows (http://www.jbt.slu.se/AAT_MILK/)!

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