

Standard operating procedures

Well-crafted standard operating procedures will hugely benefit your business

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It was a student who pushed Kells, Co Meath, dairy farmer Mark Cassidy over the edge. "They shall remain nameless," he says with a wry smile. "But after explaining something for the umpteenth time I decided I had to find a new approach to training new students or staff."

"Some dairy farmers do write down instructions, particularly if they use relief milkers, etc, but Mark has taken it to a new level," says his Teagasc dairy advisor, Vincent Treacy. "By labelling every piece of machinery and detailing exactly, step-by-step, what has to be done he has developed a virtually fool-proof system."

Mark says that buying a laminator, a cheap and simple device which allows him to print out instructions on waterproof sheets, was key. "The experts say you should never put more than about seven points on the page, and I find that to be about right," says Mark. "It doesn't mean you don't have to explain to someone what to do, but they have the advantage of being able to go back and check with the list that they are doing it right."

"Dairy farmers may list instructions for milking, say, but Mark has developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for a range of jobs: calf care for example," says Vincent Treacy. "Farmers who don't have staff or students might feel they don't need well-crafted SOPs but if they become ill, or must be away from the farm for other reasons, SOPs are invaluable for the person taking over."

A standard operating procedure or SOP is a document consisting of step-by-step instructions on how to complete a particular job or procedure on the dairy farm. SOPs can be adopted for tasks such as milking routine, washing the milking machine, calf feeding, treating a cow for mastitis and many more tasks that farmers perform on a daily basis. They can be equally relevant on farms with other enterprises too.

Benefits of a well-written SOP

A well written SOP will:

- Provide direction.
- Improve communication.
- Reduce training time.
- Improve consistency.
- Allow somebody to help out in the case of an emergency.
- Support a more profitable business.

SOPs are an excellent tool for farmers and their employees to work towards common goals. It also creates a positive sense of teamwork.

SOPs, used in combination with planned training and regular performance feedback, lead to an effective and motivated workforce.

Steps to developing an SOP

This should be an inclusive process. It should consider the input of everyone involved in the procedure. Dairy farmers/managers who consider the input from their workers will increase "buy-in" and produce a better SOP. People will support what they help create.

There are seven steps to producing excellent SOPs:

1. Planning.
2. First draft.
3. Internal review.
4. External review.
5. Testing.
6. Post.
7. Train.

1. Planning

The first step is to link the SOP with the business goal or goals that it will help achieve. The SOP can then be shaped from the beginning with steps that lead to achieving this goal. Goals



Mark Cassidy and his daughter Seona with an SOP for dealing with individual cows.

do not work without measurements and feedback on performance. For example, an SOP on milking routine should tie in measurements such as somatic cell count (SCC), total bacterial count (TBC) and thermotolerant bacteria levels in milk.

2. First draft

The next step is to make a detailed list of the steps in the order that they are done. Don't try to be perfect with the first draft because it is very likely that you will need to make changes. Writing a first draft provides a starting point for the review and discussion that will take place subsequently.

3. Internal review

Provide each employee who performs the procedure with a copy of the draft SOP. Ask them to review and suggest changes that are easier to under-

stand, more accurate or will improve performance. Assure employees that their input is important and will be considered. Workers will feel ownership and commitment to an SOP if they believe that the owner or manager included their ideas during development. Many employees, or other family members, will have good ideas.

4. External review

Dairy farmers/managers should seek advice and feedback from people such as their advisor and other farmers when creating an SOP. Give them a draft of the SOP and ask them to suggest any changes that will make it clearer and more effective.

5. Testing

For procedures to be effective, they must perform in the workplace.

There is only one way to be certain that a procedure is well-written and performs as expected. Have a person (preferably someone unfamiliar with the task) test the SOP by performing each step exactly as it is described. Any step that causes confusion for the test worker should be revised.

6. Post

Make a final draft of the SOP and display it in the appropriate location. A master SOP file should be kept in a central location where workers can review all SOPs when necessary. The workplace SOP should be laminated and printed in large text so that workers can review while completing their work. It is also essential to keep SOPs up to date.

7. Train

The last step in the SOP writing

process is to train the workers to follow the procedure exactly. Otherwise, workers will interpret the meaning of procedures in different ways, leading to inconsistency in work routine and performance.

When training workers, share the reasons why procedures must be performed correctly – not just what to do or how to do it. Workers are much more likely to follow procedures exactly when they understand why they are important.

SOPs are powerful tools for bringing dairy farmers, managers and employees together to focus on improving dairy production tasks. When everyone gets involved, goal-setting is performed, monitoring is built in and feedback is provided. This will enable the business to become more successful and also encourage employees to perform at a higher level.

Key messages

SOPs should be:

- Written in a clear and readable style.
- Specific to your farm.
- Linked to business goals.
- Written logically.
- Located beside the workstation where they are needed.
- Laminated.
- With pictures where beneficial.
- Kept to a single page.
- Broken down into appropriate chunks. For example, milking can be broken into three stages: preparation for milking, milking routine and cleaning up after milking.
- Built on feedback from internal and external personnel.
- Created with input from staff. Get buy in from your employees by involving them in the process from the beginning.
- Measurable.
- Useful.
- Preferably tested by somebody unfamiliar with the task.
- Update and reviewed regularly.