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Are we going in the right direction?

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There have been some momentous changes in the swine industry during the last decade. Many of these changes are ongoing, but the dust is starting to settle. Maybe this is the time to start questioning ourselves, as professionals serving the swine industry: Are we going in the right direction? My feeling is that we are somewhat rudderless at this time—that a sense of direction has been lost. Let's analyze this further:

Industry leadership

We have lost leadership in the industry. During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the swine veterinary profession had a strong leadership role in the industry. Our leaders at that time clearly were able to influence the direction that the industry was taking. Since then, of course, there has been intense integration and the appearance of swine production mega-companies. These developments have taken a considerable toll on our leadership position, to a point that we are increasingly becoming a service component rather than a decision-making part of these companies.

This is partly due to our failure to acquire the business and management skills that these new enterprises require. As a result, leadership in the swine industry resides more and more on administrators and not on technical professionals.

This leadership erosion has also taken a toll on the relative importance that our services are currently being given. Even though health is still a major problem and a central cause of production losses, the number of veterinarians employed by these companies is very small in relation to their size. Put another way—we have failed to make the case that our services are cost effective.

Proactive stance

We are being retroactive instead of proactive. As our society evolves and communication is more agile, a number of issues are being raised that affect our product and, therefore, our survival. Issues of food safety, welfare, water and air contamination, antibiotic usage, etc. are examples of ways in which society is increasingly getting involved in how we do things. In many of these cases, the industry response and even our response has been

defensive and retroactive. We spend a lot of time and effort trying to explain things that are increasingly counter to where society is heading. Also, there has been a reluctance to speak up when social issues are being raised. As a group, we have shied away from taking public positions on issues that affect our industry. This has also been interpreted as a lack of leadership.

We need to be proactive, to anticipate and embrace the issues that our community is raising or is likely to raise. We have to be ready to change the way we do things, to be more flexible and inventive, to be more caring and involved.

This retroactive attitude has also permeated our approach to health issues. The continuous emergence of new pathogens highlights our inability to develop production systems that are more resilient than those presently in place. We also do not act even in the presence of possible new emerging diseases. PMWS is a good example where we are taking a wait-and-see attitude instead of actively trying to prevent the disastrous consequences that the appearance of this disease in the US would have.

Information sharing

Both as researchers and as practitioners, we are failing to share information. Competition is the American way, but is it the best way? In the area of research, is the grant competition model the one better suited to solve the industry's problems? Other countries, notably Denmark and The Netherlands, approach problems in a united effort and have historically been more successful in using their research to solve problems. Our model of competitive research has generated much information, but few solutions.

Practices also are sharing less information, again driven by competition between them. This has led to practice "secrets" that get leaked out, often in a distorted way and are then misapplied by other clinics. We no longer have open discussion forums where this information can be shared.

We recently have experienced the advantages of a communal style of work. The Swine Disease Eradication Center has been able to get the faculty of the swine group

working together on research projects. This has been a very positive development, both for research productivity, as well as from an environment of open discussion that has improved our experiments. However, we still have not been able to successfully and continuously work together with faculty from other universities, since we are still locked in the competitive grant model. These are lost opportunities that have had a negative impact on our ability to solve problems.

The industry also works in a competition mode, and most companies are very secretive about what they do. But in a global climate, competition comes from other countries and other commodities and not necessarily from other producers. In contrast, Denmark uses a model of open information sharing and a near-national effort in technical development and research which has resulted in a very successful and competitive industry.

We need to develop the appropriate forums where we can openly discuss and share information.

Global outlook

Although we all recognize and accept that swine production today is a global activity, we have failed to aggressively adopt a global outlook and look for the opportunities that globalization offers.

Even as some of our larger companies start to expand in Eastern Europe and Latin America, we are not participating in this expansion except as casual service providers.

There is a tremendous potential in the richness that this multicultural globalization is bringing. We see it every day as we deal more and more with foreign workers in our farms. But to fully be able to capture this richness and these opportunities, we need to change our mindset and open up to new cultures, new languages, and new experiences.

Learning and innovating

We have not learned our lessons. PRRS has been a tremendous teacher. The virus has been able to slip through the most minute cracks in our biosecurity armor. It has changed and adapted at great speed, making most of our control measures obsolete before we even start applying them. Every time that we have been convinced of finally having a solution, the virus has turned around and bit us again.

PRRS is clearly a virus of the new industry. It thrives in offsite production units, making a mockery of our beliefs that offsite weaning would prevent disease. It thrives in multi-source systems, highlighting our inability to keep separate sow herds at a comparable health level. It also

thrives in the larger sow units, suggesting that we may be reaching a limit to the size that these units should have.

We have not been able to change our paradigms and change the way we do things in the face of this onslaught. We build higher fences in our biosecurity and become more (obsessively?) strict in our production programs. We build increasingly larger swine units and continue using the failed multi-source system. We make no substantial changes, and we just continue to hammer away at a system that is clearly failing.

Where are the new ideas and the “think-outside-the-box” initiatives that will allow us to vanquish this scourge?

Untested technologies

As part of this desperation to survive in the face of a rapidly changing industry and a highly adaptable disease agent, we have jumped in and used all kinds of untested technologies.

Many of these technologies have, of course, proven to be successful—but some are downright dangerous. The problem has been our nearly immediate adoption of technologies that have not been rigorously (or even lightly) tested, something that does not reflect well on our standing as the scientists involved in this industry.

Conclusion

We need to change. We need to communicate more and share more. We need to develop a united vision for our industry and act more as a team than as competing individuals and companies. We need to develop a global outlook and lead the expansion of our industry in this direction. Lastly, we need to market our skills better and to develop the new skills necessary to allow us to regain the leadership of the swine industry that we once had

