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# Basic training: Hands-on mentoring and use of computer graphics and animation

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In 1990, when Midwest pork producers began to expand their operations and, more importantly, transform from smaller family farms (< 500 sow, farrow-to-finish) to predominantly three-site or multi-site operations (commonly 1200 sows or larger), we would have predicted that management would have been incredibly easy. For the most part, units were the same:

- Crated breeding/gestation
- All in/all out farrowing rooms
- European genetics
- Similar feed
- Same number of females to breed every week
- A.I. semen delivered to the farm
- Wean twice weekly
- Labor specialists
  - Breeding
  - Farrowing
  - Nursery
  - Finisher

How wrong we were! Although the fundamental units of management have stayed the same, personnel issues have grown more complex.

Most units or systems have struggled with the following:

- Understaffing
- Inexperienced workers
- Unmotivated workers
- High worker turnover
- Poor training techniques
- Inexperienced leadership
- Multiple site production (which separates workers in the system and does not allow them to see the “big picture”)
- Work expands to fill the day (workers not working ahead in the week or day)

- Inappropriate promotion from within the farm (e.g., power washer becomes breeding manager)
- Personnel not understanding the production goals (i.e., not understanding the importance of breeding targets)

This list could go on and on. The result has been that many units or systems have not performed up to expectations.

Training on the family farm was a continuous process with owners being engaged both in production and in the expansion of their knowledge base.

- Regular herd health visits always allowed producers to ask many questions.
- Producers read every hog magazine.
- Producers got information from many other sources, such as university and county extension, meetings, producer groups, etc.
- Producers didn't keep regular hours, rather they understood what the important work was and got it done.
- If a procedure was important and effective, producers kept doing it consistently, time after time. They built on this knowledge base as the years went by.

Training today's production workers has definitely created a big challenge. It's not as simple as writing a good production manual. I and other members of Swine Vet Center have been doing a lot of work in an attempt to improve the effectiveness of training techniques and materials. We feel that we should be able not only to get better production from these farms, but also more consistent production.

The old training techniques were considered to be failsafe because of the following:

- Workers grew up on a farm and learned animal husbandry skills via a hands-on approach over a long period of time.
- Workers were usually 4H and FFA members.
- Workers had the desire to work with swine.
- Workers had many years of experience.

- Workers benefited from hands-on training (passed on from father to son, etc.)
- Workers knew what worked on their farm and were able to use and apply their knowledge.
- Workers had a very good work ethic.

The production revolution brought the following:

- New and larger units
- Demand for organization of labor
- Detailed, written production manuals
- Classroom-style training with many written outlines and descriptions of duties, etc.

The problems we encounter have often been associated with:

- Too much information, too fast. (One large farm worker who was quitting after three weeks on the job told me that we expect too much. For the first couple of weeks he was being trained in parking lots, bandwidth, heat checking, ultrasound, etc. when he was trying to concentrate on things like how to find the restroom if he needed one in a unit of this size!).
- Workers with no experience, requiring longer training periods.
- Workers with little or no motivation to learn or read on their own, preferring to do only what is required.
- Understaffing with inadequate time for proper mentoring or training; workers are “thrown into the fire” right away and asked to perform before they could be trained.
- Workers with little or no advanced education in animal science/husbandry, communication, leadership, etc.

We at Swine Vet Center have designed training aids to help speed up and improve the training process. Today’s technologies have greatly helped our efforts in this area.

We have utilized the following tools and methods:

- MS PowerPoint<sup>(r)</sup>
- Scanning pictures and records
- Spreadsheets and graphs
- Digital photography
- Videos or video clips using Dazzle<sup>(r)</sup>
- Freehand drawing and photo editing using Corel Draw<sup>(r)</sup>, and Corel Photo Paint<sup>(r)</sup>
- Animation using Corel RAVE<sup>(r)</sup>

A visual depiction of procedures that we are trying or planning to implement with pictures and videos during the formal classroom lecture greatly enhances the workers’ learning curve (i.e., a picture is worth a thousand words!). Another advantage of this method is the ability to train multiple people at once while getting present staff on the “same page” for both current and new procedures.

Classroom work will never be a complete substitute for on-farm, hands-on training. Too often in the past, after giving a classroom lecture consisting of outlines and overheads, we’d come back to the unit in a couple of weeks to find workers either not doing the procedures correctly or still doing it the “old way.” When asked about it, they responded:

- “We didn’t understand that we were supposed to change the procedure.”
- “We didn’t understand what to do.”
- “We asked one of the other workers and they said to do it *this way*.”
- Etc.

All classroom-style training must still be followed by “in-the-barn” training consisting of the following:

- Mentoring
- Shadowing
- Check-lists for knowledge levels and skills
- Etc.

We believe that application of new technologies will greatly enhance our ability to rapidly train and develop highly skilled swine production workers who can achieve leading industry production. To date, we have developed training modules to target specific production areas or practices. Presently, we are in the process of further developing some of these into self-contained, interactive training modules complete with quizzes and evaluations.

