

**Knowledge management in Dairy Farms:  
Role of advisers in the formation of labor relations.  
The case of the Mar y Sierras milk area in Argentina**

Sub-theme: Knowledge & Information

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**Abstract:**

*In Argentina, the dairy sector is of great importance, both at the level of production and in the social aspect of the workforce. Professional advisers play a transcendent role in the relationship between the owners of the company and the workers, as well as they can contribute to the formation of interpersonal bonds improving the process of knowledge transfer. This work was a phenomenological qualitative research. Eight professional advisers were interviewed who manage 32 dairy farms at the milk region of Mar and Sierras in Argentina. Social networks, their interpersonal ties and the degree of strength of these links determine the flow and quality of information and its influence on the efficiency of the productive process. This framework study identified four attributes common to advisers with their qualities that facilitate the formation of interpersonal links in the dairy farm. They were gaining trust, respecting culture, acting with authority and exemplary behavior. The company must take a positive attitude towards cultural change by generating training spaces for staff in general and for advisors in particular on sociological and human resources aspects.*

*Keywords: Dairy farms; Knowledge management; Adviser; Links*

**Introduction:**

The Mar y Sierras milk region is characterized by having dairies of different scales of production; they are 241 dairy farms representing 10% of the total of the country, producing 14% of the total milk volume. The average production size is of 206 hectares, the feeding systems combine pasture with grain supply, the average size of the herds being about 480 milking cows and the average personnel involved in the process is 9 people per dairy farm (MAYFP, 2016).

The Dairy farms are advised by professionals who work part time, in aspects such as reproduction, animal health, nutrition and pasture crops. They also act as an indispensable link between the owners and the company personnel, in the daily work of management and the coordination of tasks of the work groups.

Analyzing the workforce, we see that the work groups in the region of Mar y Sierras performs their work based on a strong training by the companies and the necessary information to develop the tasks comes from the same company.

In an earlier study (Sánchez Abrego et al, 2015), we concluded that 42% of employees use information external to the company and that it comes from their previous specific training in work and technology management. 92% of the staff have familiar or friendly links with all the members of the working group, and willingly accept to work with them, although 67% of them do not help their companions and do not protect them under any circumstances. It conspires with the support of interpersonal bonds.

Cultural diversity and formal education mean that only 50% of employees express that they adapt to the behavior of others, a situation that generates, not infrequently, labor conflicts and changes in personnel (Stup et al, 2006).

There is a greater insertion of urban employees, who are looking for good salaries in rural areas. This implies that the traditional model where the rural worker prevails has been displaced by the arrival of people from the city, encouraged by the monetary retribution, although the roughness of the tasks causes that in the short term they leave their job.

The adviser E.4 states: "The trend is the urban labor model, with rotating shifts of 48x24 hours, facilitating the arrival of personnel to the rural area"

Both the attitude towards work and the level of turnover of staff will vary depending on the degree of satisfaction and opportunities that the employee develops in the organization itself.

The work routine of the dairy continues to be one of the most important risks that dairy production has and one of the significant negative factors when it comes to valuing the job in the dairy for those looking for a new job. The purpose of this work was to study the role of the advisers in the working groups and how they collaborate in the formation of links.

### **Objectives:**

The main objective was to describe the attributes of the advisers, based on the study of the experiences of the interviewees, to facilitate the cohesion of working groups and to promote human relations, to improve the processes of knowledge transfer.

In addition, propose actions to be implemented in the company taking advantage of the role of the advisers in the productive process.

## **Methodology:**

This qualitative and phenomenological study was carried out between March 2016 and January 2017, it involved 8 professional advisers who manage a total of 32 dairy farms of the region of Mar and Sierras and worked part-time together with the different working groups in the farm.

The professional advisers interviewed were 6 veterinarians and 2 agronomists, who, in addition to contributing their knowledge and experience in the science in which they were trained; they perform a very important task, such as coordinating the work groups in the dairy farm facilitating the management of the managers of the dairy farm and interacting socially with the workers.

Extensive interviews with professionals from different fields of science seek to identify the factors associated to facilitate the formation of labor relations, the capacity to transfer knowledge between human resources with little education, the role that the advisers have in the communication processes and behavior of the human group in the workplace of the company.

As professionals act in different ways in working groups, and even interact with different people. The perception they have on the interpersonal ties in working groups and the process of knowledge transfer; it will be enriched by the different visions about the productive process.

From an ontological assumption, the reality is subjective and multiple, as it is experienced by the study of Creswell (2012). The qualitative methodology allows to be used in an inductive logic when studying the diverse topics within the context of the company, as the interviewees express it of their own work experiences. For the achievement of these premises, the extensive interview is the best tool that the researcher has to inquire about the experiences of the actors.

The researcher adopts as valid the informant perceptions, understanding and explaining the phenomenon through the interviewees own voices (Creswell, 2012).

## **Interpersonal links and social networks: conceptual framework**

In a previous paper presented at the 19th IFMA Congress (Sánchez Abrego and Dick, 2013), we had emphasized that the concept of linkage had been suggested by establishing two types of social networks involved in the processes of knowledge diffusion (Granovetter, 2005). On that occasion, an extensive review had been presented on the subject of the strength of links.

In summary, we remember that interpersonal links are a so-called woven network where it can appreciate the existence of numerous relational lines, which give rise to the so-called strong links, and secondly a low density network formed by relational lines that do not exist between individuals and known groups, these give rise to so-called weak links. We held on that occasion that those with few weak links have an important restriction on access to information.

Authors had already suggested (Hansen, 1999) that it is from the existence of weak links that greater and updated information is achieved. One of the sources of weak links is precisely the groups that share labor obligations and formal organizations, even those where the objective is put into recreation.

The companies have implemented practices that improve the availability of information, either by training or by processes of rotation of the personnel between units of the company that allow to show the development of routines or tasks. In the case of the dairy farms in the region of Mar y Sierras, this rotation process is used more as a result of a need than a management action, as it is recognized by the adviser E.3 "there are companies that cannot maintain more than 90 Days certain key employees, in which the rotation is constant".

The transfer of knowledge can be improved, when in the cases of personnel turnover, the person involved and the group that receives show a social identity of a higher order (Heald et al, 2002). Adviser E.2 pointed out that "efficient employees often achieve good jobs and improve efficiency, although it is the result of urgency."

An additional difficulty for the cases studied is that has improved the lack of the so-called "man of the field", the one who lives in the countryside and knows his task, with the arrival of more and more frequent people of the city to work. The adviser E.7 suggested that "the tendency is for the employee model to be urban, the one that works motivated only by money." On the other hand, the adviser E.2 pointed out that "there are businessmen who prefer the employee settled in the field with his family and are willing to invest, improving their building facilities."

Another important factor that gives rise to rotation processes is the conflict between workers (Porter, 1993), suggested by studying the common causes that cause an employee to leave his work in the dairy farm. Adviser E.1 points out that "the concept of a rich employer gives rise to resentment, particularly in employees who come from other cultures." In turn, adviser E.8 points out that "we as advisers can understand each other's thinking, identify sources of conflict and modify routines to mitigate negative impacts".

In studying the impact of knowledge transferred by the group-rotating member it is suggested that group receptivity is a determining factor in the process of knowledge transfer (Kane et al., 2005), and from there the importance of the unique culture to avoid conflicts, a difficult situation to achieve in the work environment of the dairy farm.

Besides, people find it easier to absorb new ideas in areas where they have experience and find it more difficult to absorb new ideas outside their training area. Adviser E.6 said "employees who are self-confident are those who have received adequate training and are best able to disseminate good practices in the dairy farm."

Interpersonal informal networks are believed to play a critical role in the knowledge transfer process. In several dairies of this milk region, consultants observe the existence of strong informal networks that modify the scheduled tasks.

Adviser E.4 noted that "although there are protocols on how to do things, often people with a certain power change the procedures or for controlling, they interact with different people outside the protocol".

### **Functions of the Advisers in their intervention in the management of the company**

Professional advisers intervene, to a greater or lesser extent, in the management processes of their clients. They usually do this individually or in association with one or more professionals, from the same branch of science or combining different areas of knowledge that complement each other.

In the case of the interviewees, the form of work was in the 75% individual and 25% associated with other professionals of the same science. Adviser E.3 told us that "many actions of my work in the dairy farm are consensual with my veterinary partners, which allows that in a given situation, any of them replace me in the role of adviser"

In academic terms we can say that all respond to the format of Professional Services Firm (PSFs) working with the archetype Professional Association or P<sup>2</sup> (Greenwood & Empson, 2003).

The format of Professional Association responds to the following characteristics (Brock et al, 2007), and they have characterized as: of small size, little personal, control of pairs, generalist and customer-oriented strategies.

We remember what adviser E.1 said "I have been working in dairy farms for 14 years, I do it individually; although there are veterinary specialists I can go to if I need any technical advice." Or as adviser E.8 points out "the professional work is individual, I have always managed in that way".

The real work ability of the advisers is strongly influenced by the level and quality of the experience gained, the education received, the clear objectives, and the man-in-the-field style that bridges the gap with the staff with someone they interact (Nuthall, 2011).

When we analyze the interviews carried out, we could appreciate the different functions or activities entrusted to the advisers. They have been listed in Table 1, and ordered according to the greater or lesser number of interventions of the interviewees:

<b>Functions / Duties</b>	<b>E.1</b>	<b>E.2</b>	<b>E.3</b>	<b>E.4</b>	<b>E.5</b>	<b>E.6</b>	<b>E.7</b>	<b>E.8</b>
<b>Personnel Selection</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Supervision and Evaluation</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Interaction with staff / teams</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Definition of Jobs</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Manage WorkTeams</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>Conflict mediator</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>Ask staff for feedback</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>Participate in Planning</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		
<b>Organizes trainings</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>				<b>X</b>

Table 1: Functions of the Adviser

From the above table, it emerges that the "personnel selection" function turns out to be the main one. In the milk region of Mar y Sierras, it is common for the veterinary adviser to play a prominent role in the staff selection process, which in most cases the selected staff responds to the managers and these managers to the adviser in the productive process.

Adviser E.6 said "the selection of personnel is key to the efficiency of the production system, if we fail here, we have problems." In the same sense, adviser E.8 said "Argentina's dairy production is basically for domestic consumption and to achieve an efficient process. The employees and good cattle are the keys. Often an employee comes and asks me, "Do am I performing well my job?"

The authors acknowledge that the most important management decision is precisely staff selection (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Today, PSFs have already changed their way of

intervening in management, modifying the classical culture of professional bureaucracy and providing multiple services to their clients (Brock et al, 2007).

The following six functions or actions identified are directly related to the treatment of personnel, either direct in the case of interaction, when they solicit opinions, direct work teams or act as mediators; or indirectly when monitoring and evaluating or when defining jobs.

These actions clearly have a direct impact on the formation of links in the work teams, as indicated by the adviser E.1 "the daily interaction with the staff allows them to know them better and feel that we can build on trust." Add adviser E.3 "the lack of confidence usually brings labor conflicts". Complement the adviser E.5 when expressing "trust, and the university parchments are put into play every day."

We cannot ignore that the difference in the level of education of different human groups builds barriers difficult to overcome, and even unifying as the main labor incentive, which is the search for a good retribution.

### **Significant Attributes of the Advisers:**

Management and its advisory team must understand that a diverse workforce encompasses very different approaches and perspectives on work, and must value that variety of opinions (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

The reality of the dairy farms in the region of Mar y Sierras show that in the last years more people, generally poorer, of little education and with very different cultures, are inserted in the labor force. This situation creates barriers that hinder the formation of interpersonal bonds.

The adviser E.5 said "the concept of rich man underlies in the employees from the north part of Argentine and that creates resentment. Besides, the most important motivation is the money". Adviser E.1 added "for the workers, unmet basic needs are only solved with money"

From the analysis of the surveys, comes very valuable information on the aspects that allow the advisers to intervene in the formation of interpersonal links. We have highlighted the four main attributes of the advisers, relating them with some skills necessary to achieve them, which are shown in the following Figure 1:

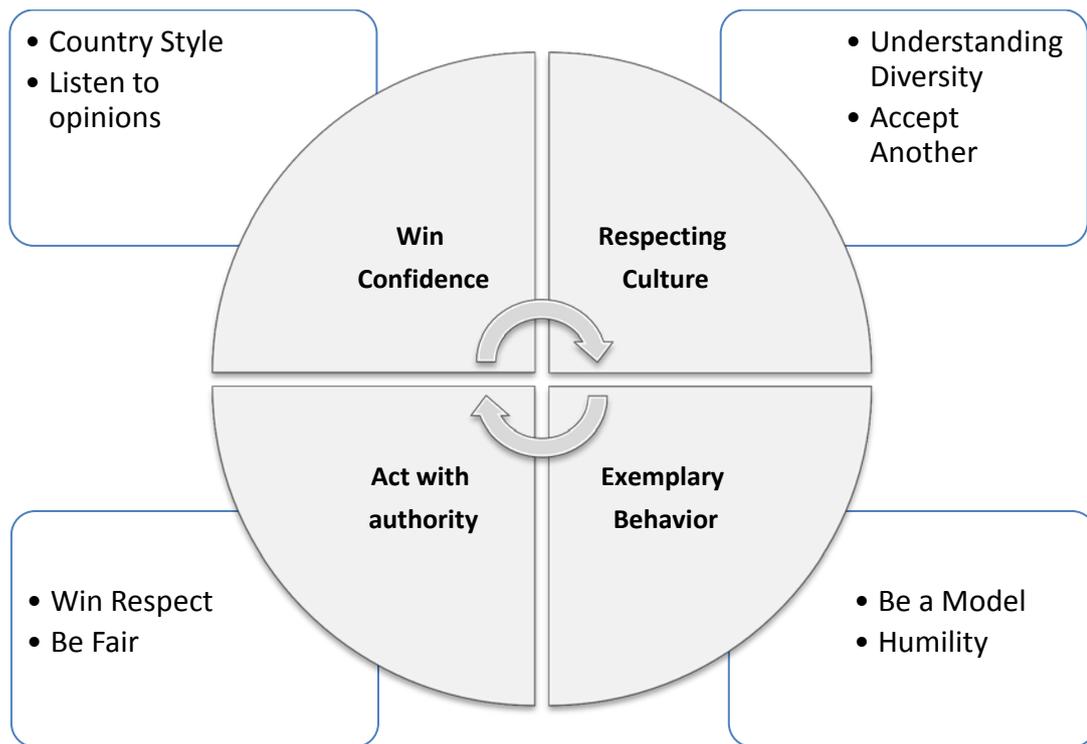


Figure 1: Attributes and qualities of Advisors

Advisers, who interact on a day-to-day basis with employees, must do so in a way that their behavior creates spaces of trust.

To do this, the man who works in the land, must know how to listen to the other, how to earn the respect of the work team, how exercises authority with justice and humility, how to respect the culture of the people around him. It is the right place to allow that the bonds will be strengthened. The adviser E.2 said "the conversation, the explanation in what we are and where we are going, is to make the staff feel as part of the improvement". In the same sense, the adviser E.4 expressed "sharing tasks and imparting fair rewards and punishments, it improves communication with employees. They feel part of the team, they are trustworthy. "

A strong interpersonal link could alleviate the transfer of complex knowledge, since its usefulness is more likely than a weak link (Granovetter, 2005).

Adviser E.4 said "if there are reliable links and decision, to know how to do it is easy to transmit," and added: "the know-how has a close relationship with the experience acquired by the person."

Groups based on relationships of friendship or familiarities are seen as more important than groups based on other social categories such as work.

In this regard, adviser E.5 said "the companies I know have social meetings between the staff". Adviser E.2 added, "There is usually a friendly relationship between employees when there is friendship between their children or if the women work in the farm." Adviser E.7 added "many of the workers are relatives to each other. This facilitates the links and also it may even complicate them in some cases."

One of the first attitudes that the adviser must assume is to begin to change the way of thinking processes. Expanding its lateral vision and giving way to the possibility of glimpsing other possibilities for the dairy farm of the future and its work groups (Mendonca Ferreira, 2015); abandoning the classic tunnel vision where nothing can be changed. The conflicts must be instances for learning and a powerful force for change (INTA, 2012).

### **Conclusions:**

From the experiences provided by professional advisers, 4 common attributes were identified that facilitate the formation of links with staff: 1) gain trust, 2) respect culture, 3) act with authority and 4) exemplary behavior.

Each attribute identifies two qualities. Gaining trust in environments of cultural difference requires the advisor to assume the ability of creating positive cultural changes where the employee feels that he is part of the business and is listened in their problems.

Acting with authority, it does mean forcing the norms of coexistence and those of the productive process, being fair in the application of prizes and punishments and gaining the confidence of its working group.

Exemplary behavior in their daily task, with fulfilling a role of extensionist, being able to collaborate with the learning of the employees and making them participants of the company's achievements. A humble attitude positions him in an unbeatable situation to be a role model for others.

In environments where cultural difference and high resentment jeopardize harmony in interpersonal relationships, the adviser must understand that respecting the cultural difference of his employees, accepting diversity as an opportunity and paving the way for a shared vision in the working group is how it facilitates the formation of links.

The actions that the company can undertake through the training, the perception of closeness with the staff, the consensus in the daily task and the support to the people who do their work well, as well as the correction with authority and justice of those deviations; it will allow a significant improvement in the work environment in the company, and improve the efficiency in the productive processes.

Taking advantage of the great acceptance by the staff of the training processes, it is desirable that companies generate spaces to implement strategies of cultural change that allow to improve the interaction among the personnel and that they feel that their task is important not only for itself or its team, as well as for the company.

If we talk about training, it would be advisable that the professional advisers will be trained mainly in aspects that have to do with sociology and dealing with people; so that their performance in the company constitutes a real extension action. In this point, the university should play a prominent role in its development.

There are very interesting topics to study, but we believe that it should be investigated in the future, how the transfer of knowledge is affected by the behaviors induced by the structure of the social network in the company.

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