



## DAIRY ADVISORY TEAMS

### Is an advisory team in your future?

By C. William Heald, Dairy Extension Specialist, Penn State University

Are you looking for a few new ideas that would make your farm more profitable and improve your lifestyle? More and more farmers are finding that advisory teams fill this bill.

Producers say that on-farm progress is faster when an advisory team helps formulate the year's business plan and then know your situation when the plan needs adjustment.

Now is a good time to begin determining if an advisory team will work for you. Also, begin brainstorming about who should be invited to serve on the team. During the process, some of the following questions may arise:

#### **What is an advisory team?**

The easiest way to think of it is an informal board of directors that meets infrequently, possibly monthly or bi-monthly. They furnish new ideas that have been tested on other farms. The producer becomes the chief executive officer (CEO) in this analogy and decides to use, modify, or reject any plans offered. Advisors have seen what works and doesn't work on the top farm operation with fresh eyes and can recommend ideas that may have been overlooked.

#### **Who should be on the team?**

Think of people whom you rely on for advice today. Pick three to five whom you think will work together well as a "team." Good communication, cooperation, and collaboration are required, and all need to be free to express their ideas.

Some people tend to invite too many to participate on their team. The more people on the team the more time required hearing everyone. If key people are missing from the team, they can be added later or invited to address a specific purpose. Start small and keep meetings short. With good agenda and time management, team meetings should last less than an hour.

#### **If these are the same people who advise me, why have a team meeting?**

There are many good reasons. Here are a few: It helps to have the nutritionist speak to the veterinarian and the veterinarian speak to the lender and to have the principle decision-makers hear the discussion and ask questions.

When you are together, there is less room for run-around or miscommunication. Here is what one producer said about his team, "Got the veterinarian and the nutritionist talking together, got the banker involved and finally solved a few thing." Another said, "Gives the banker a better perspective, and it's easier to get a loan approved." Another said, "Faster progress and more efficient problem solving."

#### **Who should arrange the meeting and chair the session?**

It may not be obvious, but teams led by producers do not work as well as teams led by off-farm advisors. After some reflection, this makes sense. Producers are good at many things, but they aren't accustomed to writing



# DAIRY ADVISORY TEAMS

and distributing minutes, developing agenda, calling meetings, and telling one of the more vocal advisors that it is time to hear what others have to say. These activities are easier for your professional advisors.

Further, the producer needs to be free to think about the discussion going on around him or her, to participate in the critical thinking, and not deal with the mechanics of chairing a meeting.

To continue the analogy of the board of directors, the team convener is like the chairman of the board. He leads the discussion and problem-solving activities, but the CEO makes the final decisions and allocates the resources. The team role is advisory only.