

'Tis the Season...for Reflection and Planning

By Brian Reed DVM, MBA

My mind wanders both back in reflection and forward into the unknown, as I write this month's animal care column sandwiched between the thankfulness of Thanksgiving and the wonder and joy of Christmas – soon followed by new possibilities of the yet unwritten 2024. I always enjoy this time of the year, looking back on the challenges, accomplishments, mistakes and people both coming into and leaving my life. I say I enjoy it, because even if some of the things we reflect on are difficult thoughts, we can always learn from them and put lessons to use as we look forward to the opportunities of the new year. It is important to look forward and try to plan ways in which we can improve our situation in the coming year, even though we know our plans may not work out exactly as we would want them to.

This mindset can be used on your dairy farm to help you both evaluate the past year and then use the insight gained to help plan for improvements in your situation for 2024. This can relate to animal care, animal welfare, animal productivity or farm profitability perspectives. Think back over the last year about the aspects of your farm that went well and also those areas that caused you frustration, repeat problems or missed opportunities. Make sure to give yourself a pat on the back for those things that went well on your farm this year. You put a lot of effort into those things, and it is nice to recognize when you have success. It's also important to keep doing them well in the coming year, so you don't slip back.

It is also important to honestly face those issues that caused you frustration, repeat problems and missed opportunities. Now that you have some hindsight, ask how and why those things occurred. Can you improve or change something next year so those issues are not a problem in 2024? Are there housing improvements, changes to feed quality, better training of employees and family members, or improved protocols for prevention or treatment that could lead to success for you?

From an animal housing perspective, can ventilation be improved, stall beds upgraded, sprinkler systems put in, or smooth concrete be grooved in areas that have become slippery over the years? What you think are animal health or injury problems may really be animal housing issues. If these are the main issues for you, plan to improve them before they cause problems in 2024 to prevent a repeat of your 2023 problems.

From a feed quality standpoint, ask yourself what the root causes of any issues you experienced might be. Feed quality is a major factor in everything from animal health to animal productivity to farm profitability. The causes of these types of problems can range from genetic selections of seed to harvest timing and techniques to storage and feed out issues. If we don't get all these things done right, we live with them until we get another chance with the next year's harvest. Think back on 2023, learn from it, and make sure 2024 goes better for you.

This is also the time of the year to take a look at how your protocols have worked for you in the past year. Are your outcomes what you would like, or are there changes that could improve your success? Is everyone working on your farm following the protocols and procedures developed for your farm, or has there been protocol drift over time that would benefit from retraining? Most employees really do want to do a good job, but they will drift in their actions over time if they don't realize how important it is to do things a certain and consistent way on your dairy farm.

From a farm profitability standpoint, it is always a good idea to take a look at the past year once the final numbers are all entered in to evaluate how things went. I like to convert the actual values for a farm's various accounts to a \$/CWT of milk sold basis. This allows a farm to compare to previous years as well as to other farms as benchmarks. This will oftentimes allow you to identify your competitive advantages and disadvantages. Once you have identified them, you can focus on ways to change for the better in the coming year.

In all of these examples, you may find it useful to involve your various farm advisors to help guide you with ideas to improve your situation. They may have a broader perspective than you do from being involved with many more farms, so you might gain from their experience to help your situation.

The passing of another year can and should serve as inspiration to think about what went well in the past year and what the next year may hold for you, your family and your farming enterprises. I wish you well in the new year and hope the planning you do now will pay off in the future.