

## **On your dairy farm, are you a blue-collar or white-collar worker?**

*By Brian Reed DVM, MBA*

The current extreme cold weather we are experiencing as I write this column magnify the differences in work environments between various types of workers. I'm glad that today, my work environment includes a room heated by a wood burning stove while I look out on a cold, brutally windy, but otherwise sunny day. I know many of the dairy farmers I work for are out in the elements working on not only the normal daily tasks of a dairy farm but also trying to beat the effects of water turning into ice and manure turning into frozen chunks. It can be exhausting when this occurs day after day during a prolonged cold spell.

American writer Upton Sinclair used the term "white-collar" in some of his writings to refer to administrative work, as those workers were the stereotyped suit and tie workers in office settings. These roles can be administrative, managerial or executive in nature. In contrast, blue-collar jobs were generally more oriented towards manual or physical labor. These workers generally wore darker colors and more functional clothes for the manual work required.

As we think about the many roles and responsibilities on dairy farms, which type of worker best describes your role on your dairy farm? At first thought, you may think that is a stupid question. Of course, milking cows, feeding cows, providing care and treatments for animals, and trying to win the current daily battles against winter are physically demanding work that falls under the blue-collar category. I agree, as you probably wouldn't even think of doing any of those things wearing a suit and tie! But on the other hand, tasks such as accurate bookkeeping and record-keeping of all kinds, strategic planning for your business, financial planning and banking, and effectively managing your workforce – whether they be employees or family members – are also vitally important. On larger dairy operations, many of these roles may be separated so there are true blue-collar versus white-collar roles in the operation. On smaller farms, these necessary roles may be performed by only a small number of people. These people need to wear different hats, or perhaps different collars, to achieve all the important roles they must perform daily.

Why is this important to performing high-level animal care on your dairy farm? First, it is important that optimal animal care occurs on your farm every day for your success. Part of this is the blue-collar component of actually getting this done physically every day, both from individual animal needs as well as keeping breeding programs and other protocols operating even on the worst winter days. This work should be done in a well-planned, efficient manner and in as safe an environment as possible for both animals and workers.

Structuring, planning, evaluating the effectiveness and problem-solving with all of these things require a white-collar focus from whomever is in charge.

As I work with many farms on transitions between generations, two topics related to this concept regularly recur. The first is that the upcoming generation on many dairy farms are very focused and concerned about achieving a family life versus workload balance that will work for them. The second is a frustration with work processes and facilities that make work more difficult, more time-consuming, and more unsafe than is necessary. The two subjects are related, as getting the necessary work done in an efficient and safe manner allow for a more balanced lifestyle to occur. If we have tasks that require “2 people in a pickup truck with an old gate,” “machinery” gates to move animals or “duct tape and band-aid” type of fixes instead of proper solutions occurring on a farm, change is needed if we want the next generation to continue on the farm. Spending valuable time doing inefficient or unnecessary work eventually starts to erode almost anyone’s work ethic. We all want to feel like our work is necessary and we are accomplishing important things.

To answer the question “Are you a blue-collar or white-collar worker?” the answer for many is that you are both if you are part of a modern dairy farming operation. It is in everyone’s best interest to make sure the work that is done with your animal care program is effective, efficient and safe. On family farms, it also can strengthen relationships and interest in the next generation if a team approach is used. This type of team effort can ensure everyone feels they have input and are an important part of the family dairy farm.