

Asking Questions Like a Three-Year-Old

By Brian Reed DVM, MBA

Many of you can relate to the experience of a child or a grandchild asking “Why?” over and over again about something they have seen or heard. You may also recall ending the questioning by answering “because that’s just the way it is” or “go ask your mother” when you are at a lack of a good answer or just losing your patience. Children of this age are learning to ask questions to gain a deeper and deeper understanding of the world around them, learning about cause and effect and asking probing questions about rules and limitations. Those who ask good questions and receive valuable answers achieve a deeper understanding of their world.

You may be asking yourself “what does this have to do with animal care, Doc?” The concept of digging deeper and deeper by asking searching questions to understand animal health issues on your farm has everything to do with animal care. Those dairy farm families that I work with that are constantly trying to improve their operations in various ways over the years tend to make great progress over time. Those who may not be as aggressive, and just accept things and do the same things they have always done, tend not to make as much progress over the years. They may still be successful, as long as they do enough things well enough to compete in their industry, but they will probably be giving up some potential.

One example of this concept might be the response to a pneumonia problem in transition replacement heifers. One farm, after a complete examination to determine that the cause of the problem is pneumonia, might reach for their favorite antibiotic and then move on with the other tasks of the day. Hopefully, they identified the problem early enough in the course of the disease to get a good response to treatment, but time will tell. The next farm might also use the same antibiotic, but instead of just moving on to the next task, decides to dig a little deeper and starts to ask “Why?” questions of themselves, their employees, their veterinarian and other farm advisors. Hopefully, as they continue to ask deeper and deeper “Why?” questions, they can identify some contributing factors that, if properly addressed, will lead to fewer and less severe pneumonia problems in the future. This line of questioning may identify opportunities related to the heifer’s environment, ventilation, immune and vaccination status, nutritional factors, bedding and housing, and possibly compliance factors with employees. As you can imagine, a farm with this attitude will most likely make progress on their pneumonia issues over time.

This concept of continuing to ask “Why?” questions is really at the heart of preventive medicine. Preventive medicine can be used to minimize or prevent certain things from ever developing and as a result, moving production numbers forward on a farm as well. It is important to keep asking “Why?” questions for other health issues, such as wet calf problems, mastitis or fresh cow disease issues, and other herd health areas such as reproductive performance or feed

quality issues. Remember to engage with your farm advisors on these issues, as they may have valuable perspectives and experiences that could help your situation.

So, the next time someone suggests that you are acting like a 3-year-old, just smile, thank them and move on with your day!