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Low Stress Cattle Handling

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Part I

Interest in Low stress cattle handling is rapidly growing in the United States.

If you want a detailed idea of this, look on the internet, and you will find close to 100,000 sites listed under “Low Stress Cattle Handling.”



It seems that we are now trying to relearn what the 19th century trail bosses were aware of as they drove their herds North to the railheads. They knew that each stressful moment or misstep on the part of the cattle translates into loss of weight, additional work for the cowhands and smaller profits for the owners.

Studies over the past decade have now made it very clear that emotional stress on cattle is detrimental to their health and productivity. This translates into higher costs of production, which could be disastrous for a rancher, given today’s increased expenses for fuel, fertilizer, and feed.

It is now beyond dispute that stress compromises the immune system of cattle, slows their rate of growth, slows their rate of reproduction, and reduces their ability to derive maxim benefit from feed and medication. Forceful handling also requires manpower that could be used more profitably on other jobs or eliminated entirely. It also results in more injuries to the cattle, the handlers and the facilities. The final result of stressful handling is a higher death rate among the cattle, and a lowering of the quality of beef that gets sent to market.

These considerations aside, there is one thing I’m sure all of us would like to change in the behavior of our cattle. We would like to change their behavior from “opposition” to “cooperation,” simply because things work better, faster, and safer this way. The big stumbling block in this has always been the issue of just how to do this. Due to the ongoing work of Bud Williams, Temple Grandin and many others, methods of low stress handling are becoming more detailed and more widely accepted each year.

In pursuit of cooperation on the part of cattle, the first thing that must be done is to look at the attitude and techniques of the handler.

If the handler approaches cattle with forceful body language that suggests a predator on the hunt, the cattle will probably run, or may turn and fight. If they are confined and unable to do either one, they will suffer a degree of stress that is extremely harmful, and, if sever enough, can cause death.

However, if the handler approaches the cattle with body language that mimics that of the leader of a herd, the cattle will soon accept his leadership, and their initial opposition will largely melt away. In short, the handler must come to understand and apply “Lingua de Vaca,” the language of cattle.

Another way of saying this is that although we are predators, if we don’t act like predators, our cattle won’t have to act like prey; if we don’t chase, yell and force them, they will soon learn that it is not necessary to fight or run from us.

Calm acceptance of our leadership is what low stress handlers are working for when they put cattle

through low stress training. What happens is that when we use the silent body language of the herd, we are able to earn their respect simply by causing them to yield to us. And when we move them calmly, without any threat or pain, they begin to trust and respect us.

The truth is there is no democracy in the world of prey animals. Prey animals cannot tolerate a situation where there is no one animal in control; and they constantly test each other to find out which one is the most capable of leading the herd. To survive in their world, they must be able to flee immediately in the direction taken by the leader.

So, in low stress handling, we try to tap into this principle of natural herd organization and take over the role of leader.

When we are successful at this, cattle experience a reduction of stress, even in situations that are painful to them. For example, if you force cattle into a chute when they are in a frightened state of mind, fear and pain get mixed together and they become more frightened and more stressed when subjected to any procedure, mild or painful, and in future handling will resist entering the chute. If, however, they are prepared for the confinement of the chute, and brought in calmly, they will reenter the chute time and time again.

Cattle have a high pain threshold, and are usually able to shake it off like professional athletes do. Emotional stress, however, stays with them and eats away at all aspects of their well-being.

I have found that by using low stress methods, I do not have to doctor calves during or after weaning. Also, I am able to use light weight moveable panels for my pens, and rarely need help to work my cattle. Often, I am able to assist a cow in the pasture that is need help calving or needs medication, without any restraint.

Overall, we must learn to understand and respect the psychology of cattle if we want to gain the benefits of reducing stress in their lives. If we offer cattle the best stewardship we can, we will both benefit. They will live longer, more productive lives, and we will be able to ranch more profitably.

Let me now give you an example of how important effective communication is in the low stress handling of cattle.

Let's suppose you are a prisoner of war in camp where no one speaks your language, and a guard shouts something at you that you do not understand. You would no doubt start to become anxious. The guards would soon grow impatient and might start shoving you with their rifle butts. Then your anxiety would really take over! Perhaps all they wanted was to take you to another room, but were unable to tell you this in a way you could understand. This is often the situation with cattle; they get yelled at and pushed around in ways that signify danger to them. But if we learn to use their language, the language of the herd, we can gain their cooperation and make our handling of them far less stressful.

What is the cost to the rancher? Basically, it is a few hours of training and consistent low stress handling thereafter. The result will be to bring about a change in the feelings and behavior of your cattle for a lifetime.

There is one key technique that every handler needs to know about, that of "Pressure & Release." It has been found in low stress handling that cattle learn best through the slow application of pressure, and the quick release of pressure when they make the choice that you want. I say "learn" because we don't believe that we can really "teach" them anything. Low-stress handlers, whether they are working with horses or cattle speak of "setting things up" so that they can learn what we want them to. In this way, our idea becomes their idea, because we structure their options so that the most attractive one to them is the one that we want them to choose. When cattle are worked this way, they behave like they are doing

exactly what they want to, and not that we are forcing anything on them.

This is the method I use initially, when training calves, in order to gain their trust and respect, and later, to move cattle from pasture to pasture or when working with them in the pens.

In low stress handling, we try to copy the restrained pressure and quick release that prey animals use on each other. When we are successful at this, cattle come to respond to us as they would to another animal in their herd. Ironically, the more we work with them in this way, the closer they bond to us, and the more calmly they follow our directions.

Also, in low stress handling, there is no place for anger or punitive action on the part of the handler. The handler must always remember, that cattle respond according to what they think they must do to survive, and so, when a handler is unsuccessful in getting something done with cattle, he must accept the fact that, it was probably the way he set up the situation, or his timing, or the degree of his pressure, that caused the cattle to do what they did.

Let me give you an example of a low stress approach to moving cattle out of a pen.

The handler starts by keep the cattle moving in the pen, and does not let them rest anywhere except by the gate. In this way, they are only able to relax in the area where he would like them to be, and are put to work in other parts of the pen. In contrast to traditional handling, here the handler lets them know where he does not want them to go, rather than forcing them to go where he would like for them to go. And so, very quickly, the handler's idea soon becomes their idea. As a result, they both get what they want. The handler gets them through the gate, and the cattle get relief from his pressure. Overall, the pressure a handler uses should be just enough to overcome the resistance of cattle, and the release of pressure should come at the first sign of yielding. In the application of pressure the handler should always express a "matter of fact" attitude, and never approach cattle with an angry determination to have them make the choice he wants. His attitude should resemble the business like attitude cattle express when they want to move each other. It should not resemble in any way an angry determination to force them to make a particular choice.

A measure of the success of any low stress handling session was put very well by a noted American horseman, John Lyons. He said, first, the handler must not get hurt, secondly, that the animals don't get hurt, and finally, that the animals are calmer and more responsive when you finish than they were when you started.

The first requirement of this approach is that they be in a calm, "left brain" mental state in which they can learn, and not just react with their instincts. Based on the anatomy of their brain this is called being in a "left brain" state, because the left part of the brain is where the thinking and learning capacities are located. When cattle are excited, and in a "flight or fight mode" they are described as being in a "right brain" mode, because it is in the right side of their brain that all their inherited instinctual promptings are located.

As most all of you are aware, cattle can shift in a split-second from a calm "left brain" mode, to a wild, "right brain" state of mind, and that it takes about 20 to 30 minutes for them to shift back to a left brained mode where learning can take place. So, in low-stress handling, we wait for cattle to be in a "left brain" mode before starting to handle them with "pressure and release."

Low stress handling involves not just having cattle become comfortable in your presence, but also willing to be driven away or drawn to you when you give body language cues to do so. The fact that cattle will willingly follow a pick-up full of hay does not mean that they are trained or really gentle. Following

you is their idea, prompted by hunger. It has nothing to do with your control over them. Try sending them away from food if you really want to see how well trained they are!

Cattle that are not trained to yield to restrained pressure are really quite dangerous. To frighten them away is to invite them to turn their frustration on you. A handler should be able to influence their movement with his energy and body position, to open and close off spaces to them so that they want to go, and actually choose to go where you want them to. In this manner, your idea becomes their idea, and they remain calm in carrying it out.

By way of conclusion, let me just say that *the basic message* of low stress handling, is that you have a real choice about how your cattle behave. Whether they are cooperative or adversarial, wild or gentle, in the final analysis, it is up to you and how you approach them.