



# When handling cattle, problems usually stem from a Failure to Communicate

Story & photo by **Troy Smith**, field editor

**S**ome people dread the days when they must work stock. Whether pairing cows with calves, branding, vaccinating, shipping or sorting cattle for any reason, some people look forward to such events with trepidation.

A friend once told this writer about the anxiety he felt whenever he, his father and siblings had to gather and work cattle. The whole family felt it, because things seldom went smoothly. Usually, there was much yelling and waving of arms. Both bovine and human participants became agitated. Tempers flared among crewmembers, and confused cattle bellowed and bounced off fences. Frequently, there were delays while emergency repairs were made to the working facility.

Over time, the herd became increasingly difficult to gather and keep corralled. Higher, stouter fences were built, and heavier gates were hung. Extra help was enlisted from extended family and neighbors. One year, the local banker and his horse-crazy wife joined the fray. The job always got done, but it could

get wild. For the cattle and their owners, it was as stressful as ever.

Following a particularly difficult day of working cattle, one family member described the situation with a classic line borrowed from the motion picture, *Cool Hand Luke*. "What we've got here," he stated, "is failure to communicate."

It was true. For years, the family's approach to working cattle had involved application of increasing amounts of force. All participants considered themselves capable cattle handlers, but they could not communicate effectively with the cattle or each other.

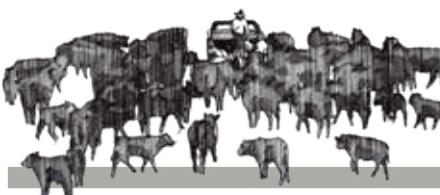
Some readers will suspect the preceding narrative is fabricated, or at least exaggerated. Others may knowingly nod, recognizing a similarity to situations they have witnessed. Some readers know it does not have to be that way. Cattle can remain calm while they are worked by skillful handlers. Working cattle can be fun for people capable of efficiently gathering, penning and processing cattle without a lot of fuss and bother, and it doesn't take a small army to do it.

## A sparse crew

On Rod Vineyard's ranch, near Chugwater, Wyo., cattle are often worked by a sparse crew of just two or three people. Sometimes one is enough, if the job at hand is done correctly.

"Even when loading bulls in a pasture, I like to do it alone or with just one other person," tells Vineyard. "Cattle don't handle as well if there are too many people."

He's talking about pulling bulls at the close of breeding season, and loading them in a trailer for relocation. However, some of



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## Getting the 'give'

"It's amazing how many experienced people are not that good at handling cattle," laments Wyoming rancher and veterinarian Randy Hunter. "Many of them think they are good at it, and maybe they have been working with cattle all their lives. They've been getting by, but maybe they haven't been doing it correctly. And, on a lot of operations, I think people have come to rely on facilities, manpower and force. It usually leads to more cattle stress, not less."

Hunter has conducted many training sessions on low-stress cattle handling, explaining the benefits and offering instruction in correct handling technique. He explains how it is a matter of communicating to animals through body language. In his experience, the hardest thing for many people is recognizing the animals' reply.

"You have to learn how to read cattle, to recognize what they are telling you. That's how you know if they understand what you want them to do," says Hunter.

Cattle will convey that message through their eyes and the position of their ears. It shows in whether they hold their heads high or in a lower, more relaxed position. The animals speak to

the handler through posture and position of the body, part and parcel.

"We can tell people what to look for, but they have to practice to get their heads around it. They must organize it all in their own minds before they can easily see the kinds of signals cattle offer," adds Hunter. "When that happens, when the handler can read the cattle, that person becomes softer. When they can get cattle to 'give' to what the handler wants, it takes less to get more."

It does take practice to become skilled at stockmanship, and time must be allocated for acclimating young animals to handling. Hunter says producers often complain that they don't have time to do things that way.

"In my opinion, they don't have time not to do it," counters Hunter, explaining how along with the benefits of reduced stress on cattle, producers will endure less stress and save time, long term.

"Eliminating all cattle stress is impossible, but we can train cattle to accept and tolerate a little stress temporarily," Hunter states. "When cattle are acclimated to handling and correct handling is used consistently, it doesn't have to be slow. If you always do it correctly, you can be pretty darn fast."

Vineyard's remote pastures are a long way from a loading facility. Usually, bulls are loaded into a trailer parked right out in the middle of the pasture. That might sound like quite an undertaking. Granted, it's not a job for a greenhorn, but Vineyard thinks just about anyone could learn how.

Parking his trailer in an open area of the pasture, Vineyard takes advantage of the lay of the land to position the trailer's rear end so the floor is as near ground level as possible. That way, cattle can enter without jumping. From horseback, the bulls are quietly sorted from the herd and walked toward the trailer's open door. The objective is to stop the bulls and hold them near the opening.

"They may walk past it a time or so, but that's okay. You just ease them back to the open trailer and hold them up. On the third or fourth try, they'll usually sniff the trailer floor and load up," explains Vineyard. "We do it that way whenever we have to load something in a pasture. Maybe one out of 25 animals will give you grief. The majority will load easy enough. The key is to set it up to succeed."

## Cumulative effect

If that sounds too simple, consider that Vineyard prepares for current and future success whenever he handles his cattle. He knows that how he communicates with them on any given day affects not only that day's outcome, but how the cattle are likely to respond when handled the next time, and the next. There is a cumulative effect.

"Getting cattle acclimated to handling pays dividends," Vineyard adds. "Minimizing stress benefits total health and feed performance, and who wouldn't rather have cattle that are easy to work with? It saves a lot of time and headaches in the long run."

Vineyard thinks too few cow-calf producers consider the consequences of their cattle-handling habits. He says he wishes more of them could take lessons from rancher and veterinarian Randy Hunter. With headquarters at Wheatland, Hunter manages a yearling operation and also develops and markets replacement-quality heifers. Vineyard purchased 150 Hunter heifers last year. He says they're probably the easiest-handling replacements he has ever purchased.

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"I've been the next owner of the other kind, too, but you could work these heifers on foot, on a horse, or with a four-wheeler. I think you could have handled them on a bicycle," grins Vineyard. "You could tell these heifers had been handled a lot and handled right, and the bred heifer that has been handled properly is a much better mother when she has her first calf. She concentrates on the calf and not the humans around her."

No longer a full-time veterinary practitioner, Hunter says his primary occupation is ranching. However, he works part-time for Veterinary Research and Consultation Service, based in Greeley, Colo.

"A large part of that is working with feedyards, on health programs and cattle handling," Hunter explains. "I also conduct seminars and speak to cattlemen's groups, mainly about low-stress stockmanship. 'Low-stress' is kind of an industry buzzword now. To me, it's just 'correct' cattle handling."

Stockmanship has become a fashionable topic of discussion at producer meetings. Hunter says that isn't surprising if you consider the way the beef industry deals with its problems.

"We're almost always looking for some kind of fix, especially for health issues. We've handed out vaccines and antibiotics, but we really haven't made a big, industry-wide improvement in animal health. The newest thing is low-stress cattle handling," says Hunter.

Unlike those well-researched animal health products, Hunter says there have been few scientific studies that document the economic benefits associated with stockmanship methods. The evidence is mostly anecdotal.

"You won't find a lot of numbers to back it up," admits Hunter. "The benefits can be hard to measure, but I believe they are real. It is logical, and the people that start handling cattle correctly tend to continue doing it. The work is easier, and their cattle do better."

According to Hunter, the industry's cattle-feeding segment seems to be more receptive to the low-stress handling concept. Many feedyards are willing to spend some money on employee training. Feedyard stewardship may undergo more scrutiny from outsiders, so public relations can be an incentive. Hunter thinks feeding operations also may have more opportunity to recognize economic advantages.

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## Failure to Communicate

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Feedyards applying low-stress stockmanship often report improved immune response to vaccination among relaxed, easy-to-handle cattle. Since cattle that are acclimated to their surroundings and trusting of handlers will let their guard down, symptoms of sickness are easier to detect. Cattle can receive timely treatment, and the outcome typically is more successful. All of that contributes to contentment among animals, higher and more-efficient weight gain and the likelihood that cattle will achieve their genetic potential for carcass merit.

Hunter believes all of the cattle industry would benefit from a more proactive approach to application of correct cattle-handling methods. While many cow-calf and stocker operators and their employees have lifelong cattle-handling experience, the methods learned from their elders and peers aren't always correct.

According to Hunter, handling cattle correctly is a communication process. Handlers can communicate through sight, sound and touch. Hunter calls sight the most effective, while the others can be distractions. Provided the cattle have a place to go, a handler can position himself to create cattle movement, direct it and stop it.

Communication goes both ways, so the handler must recognize what the animals'

are 'saying' through their response. That's the key to knowing when and where to apply pressure, how much to apply and when to quit. It takes practice.

Hunter has gained plenty of practice through his years of running yearlings, including a good many that had not seen much previous handling. Some were so flighty that they would split into two or three bunches when handlers first tried to move them. After taking time to settle each load, the cattle handled much better. When it's done right, the lessons have lasting effects. Hunter takes

the same approach when acclimating replacement heifers, by settling them in an alley.

"Last year, we artificially inseminated (AIed) 840 heifers, and all of them went through a 15- or 20-minute settling process. We'd put a load in the alley and let them run past us. Then we would

let them go by us again, only slower. Then we would start asking them to stop. When you do it in a relaxed way, you can build their confidence. When you get them to relax and give to you, it becomes easy to direct and control their movement," Hunter explains.

"When the heifers honor you in the alley, they will honor you outside. It stays with them," he explains. "It just makes it easier when you AI, pair out, move cattle to feed

or whatever. When they trust you, much less goes wrong."

## More important than facilities

Don Pindell says the experience gained while inseminating heifers for Hunter opened his eyes to how well cattle will handle when correct low-stress methods are applied. He's bred cattle on operations with facilities both plain and fancy. How handlers approach the job makes the most difference in how easy or difficult it is. Pindell is certain that it influences the outcome of synchronized AI.

"We know that stress affects conception to AI. The quieter the cattle are, the better the conception rate," says Pindell, a Wheatland-area representative for ABS Global. "When producers [who are] new to AI ask what to expect, I tell them 60% to 65% conception to first service is usually considered pretty good. ... We often beat that when the cattle are gentle and handled quietly during breeding. We've seen exceptional conception rates for [Hunter's] heifers, with up to 73% and 74% settling on the first service."

Taking lessons from Hunter, Pindell and his crew now enjoy improved communication. They communicate better with cattle and with each other.

"We're all on the same page now, and we know how to work together to avoid stress. But that's always easier when cattle are already accustomed to handling. It's easier on people, too. It's just better."

## Put Your Best Foot Forward

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when he was 11 years old. Nicholls says he was always interested in animals, but growing up in the city of Noblesville, Ind., he didn't have much exposure to livestock until he started volunteering at Conner Prairie.

As an ag volunteer, he watched Miller trim hooves on Conner Prairie cattle. Nicholls showed a lot of interest. A believer in trial by fire, Miller offered to let him try it.

Nicholls says he was really scared to do it that first time, but he thinks that Miller just wanted to see his reaction and whether he was willing to do it.

"I had seen him do it before at Conner Prairie, and he showed me how little stress was put on the cattle. That was what created the original spark of interest," Nicholls explains.

"His technique is just a little bit different, and I'm sure that comes with experience, too. Whenever we're done — I'm not saying that

mine looks bad — but you can tell that his look cleaner. He just has a different way of trimming," Nicholls emphasizes.

Nicholls had to get some of his own equipment, he says. "Kevyn has these monster hands. I had to get a smaller chisel. It doesn't sound like much, but I'm a lot more comfortable with my chisel. It really affects the stroke."

Being from the city, Nicholls didn't have a lot of contacts in the show cattle industry. Miller told his clients he had retired, but that he was training a protégé. Two or three clients stepped forward to let Nicholls work on their cattle because they wanted the style of trimming to continue. He has been gaining a client base for the past two years.

He says he's never seen trimming on a table besides on video, but he has seen the results of cattle that have been on a table.

"We've had cattle come to us that had

blisters on their feet from the grinder. That gave me even more respect for the way we do it," he says.

Nicholls is starting at Purdue University as a freshman this fall majoring in animal science. He plans to continue trimming during school. Luckily, he says, early fall is generally a slower time for trimming, so he'll have time to get settled at school before business picks up. He says he's thought about taking the business on the road again now that he's gaining a client base.

At this point in Miller's career, teaching has become a byproduct of experience, and he enjoys it. There are a lot of benefits of this style of trimming, and Nicholls is determined to keep it going, because even the smallest bit of growth in the wrong place on the hoof can be just like a rock in your shoe.