



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, University of Nebraska

Professional stockmanship

Assessment of effective cattle handling practices and facility design is a critical process that provides multiple benefits to cattle enterprises, including improved cattle performance, enhanced longevity of livestock, people and facilities; and making continual progress toward creating a workplace that focuses on quality, stewardship and long-term profitability. Most often cattlemen are advised to focus attention on assessment of a particular enterprise against a set of industry best practices as established by professional cattlemen, veterinarians and livestock scientists. Certainly these best practice approaches provide a foundation for success.

Avoiding barn blindness

The National Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program, funded by the beef checkoff, offers a host of information for cattle producers across the production chain, including training videos, sample assessments, and the national BQA protocols and supporting assessment and measurement tools. This information can be found at www.bqa.org.

Before the BQA protocols can be implemented fully across the industry, we have to turn our attention to the underlying attitude in our individual enterprises relative to quality enhancement, including our approach to stockmanship, plus how we communicate expectations about quality and cattle handling to both full-time and part-time employees and helpers.

The term “barn blindness” is appropriate to describe the habits that we gradually fall into in almost every realm of life — especially those tasks and activities that are repetitive, conform to a seasonal pattern or relate to communication. Gathering, herding, handling and processing cattle are activities where barn blindness may prevent us from seeing better ways of accomplishing the job. Humans find it difficult to implement effective self-assessment once habits have become comfortable and normal. In fact, our actual behavior may stray from our desired intent due to the accumulation of small, barely perceptible shifts in our habits. Thus, we need to find reasonable ways to reset our habits so that our behavior is truly aligned with our goals and aspirations.

Two approaches

Barn blindness can be avoided through two approaches. First of all, we should spend time observing the crews of other

beef cattle enterprises as they handle livestock. This approach provides an opportunity to identify practices, procedures and facility design that can enhance the home operation. An objective assessment provides a fresh perspective and new insights into the art and craft of stockmanship. A secondary benefit is that it may also identify behaviors or approaches that should be avoided. The truth is that we have a lot to learn from each other.

The second approach is to invite experienced professionals to observe the way that we approach cattle handling. A set of fresh eyes can provide extremely valuable feedback. An objective assessment helps us to identify hot spots that require correction, as well as providing an early detection of habits that are slowly eroding performance. Both of these approaches require that people are open to feedback and that the feedback is provided in an environment that values continuous improvement.

A contributing factor to the success of any quality enhancement is the manner in which we communicate expectations with people working in our system and the training provided to help them meet desired outcomes. This is particularly true for events where new employees will be involved or when friends and family with minimal experience are going to be helping.

The first task is to map the process with a step-by-step outline of functions, as well as the required equipment and labor for each. Once the map is completed, it is important to determine the most critical functions in the process. Once completed, a manager has a logical framework to determine the staffing, training and logistics to execute the process.

While this seems cumbersome, once established, the template can be applied year to year with only minor adjustments. For example, assume the desired protocol is to gather pairs, sort calves and administer preweaning vaccines. The desired outcome is to gather 100% of the calves and their dams, sort the calves from the cows with minimal stress, and to administer the vaccines in a

manner that assures the best immune response possible.

The process map will allow identification of the trouble spots in gathering a pasture — crossing streams, problem gates, or other impediments that require that the crew be trained so that they apply the appropriate amount of pressure to the herd to negotiate these obstacles successfully. With a goal of gathering 100% of the animals, managers can make sure that cowboys with the most knowledge of the landscape

cover the country adequately.

Low-stress sorting means having people in the alley who understand cattle movement, are effective in distributing cattle flow and handle the sorting gates correctly. The process of working calves through the race, handling and administering vaccines, and assuring that BQA protocols are followed requires that our labor force have training and then are assigned responsibilities in line with their experience and skill.

Without effective planning, communication and training, the day's work will be headache-filled, and, in the end, the pastures won't be gathered correctly, cattle and crew will be overly stressed, and the effectiveness of the vaccines will be compromised.

Take the time to learn from others, critically assess our own performance, and provide training. With effort, we can all join the ranks of professional stockmen.

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