



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Lessons from the sorting alley

There is so much to be learned from successful people — those professionals who create positive results time after time, overcome adversity with grace and determination and masterfully display craftsmanship in their endeavors. The setting is not important, nor is the profession. We can find these sustained success stories in business, agriculture, athletics, the arts, white-tablecloth steak houses and the café on the corner.

Stockmanship

There are individuals and organizations that simply exude quality and value. What do they share in common? William A. Foster best answered the question when he wrote that “quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.”

It is my deeply held belief that Foster’s definition of quality absolutely applies to livestock husbandry. During the past decade or so, I have made a conscious decision to become more masterful as a stockman and to intentionally change and adapt my skills and attitudes with a goal of lowering stress for both livestock and people during cattle handling. The work of Temple Grandin, Curt Pate, Tom Noffsinger and a number of other masters has been invaluable in making progress. With work still to be done, I’ve learned a few things.

Calm environment

Speed is not the answer. In fact, the faster I go, the slower the process moves. For example, humans tend to push cattle too hard as they approach gates and other impediments. Slowing down and releasing pressure is fundamental to attaining optimal cattle flow rates.

Noise increases stress. There was a time when I was convinced that making lots of noise was the only way to gather a pasture or move cattle down an alley. I was wrong. Several years ago, I gathered a group of yearlings from a rough-terrain pasture with only one other cowboy — we had to negotiate crossing a wide irrigation ditch, a number of gates and a bridge before arriving at the corrals.



Animal Care & Well-being

In the past, it would have taken at least four cowboys, and we would have endured several blowbacks from stressed cattle as we increased the hollering and shouting to drive them. By using low-impact herding techniques, we quietly and efficiently moved the herd with the cattle rarely leaving a walk and without the “wild eyed” outcome of the past. Our sorting alley tends to be cathedral-like in the level of silence, and it is rare that

mistakes are made at the sorting gate.

Take breaks

Tired, hungry and dehydrated people don’t handle cattle effectively. Several years ago, we had been processing and sorting cattle without much of a break. By mid- to late afternoon, frustration fueled by hunger and thirst began to take hold. Fortunately,

my wife, Laura, was intuitive enough to bring the crew to a stop. She fed and watered our crew as if they were freshly weaned calves, all the while letting people settle and relax. The break didn’t last longer than 15 or 20 minutes but it rescued the day. When we went back to work, the stress had disappeared, the speed of our process reached an optimal level, and our workmanship improved dramatically.

Communicate

Planning, communication and training make a difference. To be honest, I am one of

those guys who might be viewed as a “ready, fire, aim” type. Patience would not be the first word that my family would use to describe me (heck, it wouldn’t make the top 20), so I have to remind myself that having a plan, effectively communicating the approach and the desired outcomes, and demonstrating the skills in advance of pressure situations is required to attain success.

Stockmanship improves dramatically when the goals have been clearly determined, thoughtfully communicated and are supported by having people with the right skills and tools to complete the work.

Remain positive

Attitude is everything! Stress is contagious and it will sweep across the people on a crew and negatively affect livestock. For starters, we hire people who like the outdoors, enjoy working with cattle and horses, and have a sense of humor. Our family makes an effort to enter into our ranch work with a sense of thankfulness for the blessing of having the responsibility of stewardship, for the joy of working with livestock and each other, and with a commitment to becoming better ranchers each and every day. Do we still have our “moments?” Yep, we do, but high-stress moments are fewer and we recover faster.

Our commitment to becoming better stockmen has paid dividends and especially in terms of our level of enjoyment. While I am confident that we are reaping economic rewards as a result of our attention to better handling, the real payout has been in creating a more fulfilling work environment, and that alone has been worth the effort.

For more information consider these websites: www.bqa.org, <http://beefusa.org/lowstresscattlehandlingdvd.aspx>, <http://Cattleexpressions.com>, <http://curtpatestockmanship.com>, <http://ranchTV.org> and <http://Stockmanship.com>.

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