



Cow Whispering

Working with an animal's behavior instead of against it results in smoother handling for all involved.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Think about why you got into the cattle business. You may have grown up in the cattle business and watched your grandparents and parents work cattle. You may enjoy profitable calf prices, despite the ever-increasing input costs. You may also enjoy being able to raise a family in the farming or ranching lifestyle. However, you probably got into the cattle business because you enjoy working with cattle themselves.

Cattle are intelligent creatures; just look at the cow that always figures out how to find that hole in the fence. That intelligence is illustrated through their behavior, and understanding their behavior is key to good stockmanship, say Ron Gill, Texas AgriLife Extension livestock specialist and associate department head, and Curt Pate, owner of Curt Pate Stockmanship.

Sound stockmanship

Both gentlemen say they learned sound stockmanship from their families, but they added to that knowledge with lessons learned from many other great stockmen. Older

generations had to learn about handling livestock through their own observations or observations passed down from older stockmen, says Gill. Because of this, they knew to use an animal's behavior to their advantage, though more importantly, how to do so.

"Teaching stockmanship is the balance of understanding animal behavior and then relating that back to human behavior and how the two interact," Gill explains.

In today's fast-paced world, where multi-tasking is often a necessity, people tend to go too fast, and animals don't respond the way stockmen want them to. "Book learning" is much more prevalent now, but Gill suggests

going back to basics and working in the pastures. Move among your cattle; get to know their movement, and how they interact with each other and with you.

Pate says that when working with animals, there are two common mistakes. The first is that stockmen don't work with the animal's brain to communicate with the animal. He says that stockmen need to keep the animal in thinking mode rather than survival mode. Too often stockmen put too much pressure on cattle by moving too fast, yelling too loud or simply putting pressure in the wrong place, and that forces the cow to switch to survival mode. Any animal in survival mode clearly isn't going to work smoothly.

The second mistake is applying pressure from the wrong angle and at the wrong time, says Pate. Stockmen should communicate with an animal's eye because it changes the whole process.

He explains that many stockmen drive cattle from behind because humans are conditioned to think that way. Lines are a big



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part of life for humans. When you go to a store, you start at the back of the line to check out. Even highways condition us to think in lines. This method of thinking doesn't work with animals, though, Pate says.

Animals communicate through vision, says Gill. A stockman's position affects where they put their head. If something unknown is behind them that they can't see, that puts them in survival mode. Everything a stockman does affects an animal's behavior.

Pate notes that animals need to see where the stockman is and where they need to go. He gave the example that if you are behind them, you can't tell them where that highway is going. You can work cattle from the front or the side and still communicate where they need to go. Depending on the animal, position yourself in line with a cow's pin bones, so you form the far point of a triangle with her eye and pins. How far away that top point of the triangle needs to be depends upon the cow's response to pressure. Docile cows may need you to be right up next to them to get moving. Temperamental cows need more space.

"Point their head in the direction you want them to go. When they have to turn their head to see where you are, then that creates problems," Pate explains.

Honing skills

Pate calls himself a learner and sharer of livestock handling. He says he's not a

teacher, and he's not a demonstrator. He gives examples to inspire people to learn more.

These are skills that must be learned — they can't be taught.

Gill agrees, and since stockmanship has gained popularity recently, he says he hopes the live demonstrations that he often puts on with Pate plant a seed in people's minds to learn more.

Many stockmen think that since what they're currently doing gets the job done, they don't need to adjust their handling methods — but Gill notes that it could probably be done a lot more smoothly.

In his experience, it only takes one or two things that "stick" to inspire stockmen to keep learning more, and there are plenty of resources available to cattlemen who want to learn more about enhancing their efficiency working with cattle.

"Admit there may be a better way to do things. If we can get producers to just open their minds to the concept that, 'Yeah, there may be a better way to do it.' I heard a great football coach say one time that if you're not striving to be better and better and better, he

didn't want you on the team. That just drives in the philosophy that regardless of how good you are, you can be better," Gill notes.

Gill and Pate both put on numerous stockmanship demonstrations nationwide, which Gill thinks solidifies the concept in people's minds. They really show that things don't go right or as predicted all the time, but stockmen can and must adapt within each situation. He grins and says that a lot of times,

videos are cut to only show situations where everything is working perfectly. Live demonstrations definitely show that things can go wrong, but adaptation and perseverance have resonated well with cattlemen.

There are many resources online or on DVD. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) produced a DVD with Pate, Charlie Trayer and Joel Ham (see www.beefusa.org/lowstresscattlehandlingdvd.aspx). Gill notes many websites by several animal-handling experts. His own website is www.effectivestockmanship.com, Pate's website is www.curtpatestockmanship.com

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Beef Quality Audit and stockmanship

Consumers are interested in where their food comes from and, more specifically, how it is raised. The Beef Quality Audit (BQA), www.bqa.org, is a program to help beef producers do the right thing through training, audits and accreditation. Ryan Ruppert, senior director of BQA, explains that operations are getting bigger, with fewer people doing more work. The problem is that many times this means people handle livestock too quickly and without thought to animal behavior.

He says using stockmanship methods deliberately allows producers to do a better job and actually gets the job done more quickly. He says his grandpa and great-grandpa used to handle livestock efficiently and quietly, though they didn't have BQA training tools to learn it from, they just learned animal behavior through observations.

Ruppert says animal handling used to be an art (and could still be considered one), but BQA's goal is to make it a science.

Now, people rarely have time to spare. They have multiple things going all the time, and they think that slowly and deliberately handling livestock is a waste of time. However, it is just the opposite. Trying to work too fast, in fact, wastes time and energy. Working with animals instead of against them is what works. BQA helps producers make decisions when things aren't perfect.

BQA is about providing education to anyone who handles cattle, and it is also about continuous improvement. Certifications expire every three years, and recertifying is valuable because in the past seven to eight years, there has been new information and training available almost every year.

There are many training and certification events around the country, Ruppert explains. The calendar at www.bqa.org shows the location of all events scheduled. If there isn't one in your area, he suggests contacting your state cattlemen's association, and one can be set up. He says the BQA puts these events on as a cost share to assist the local cattlemen's associations in providing training.

He likened it to the strong push in genetic improvement within the beef industry, but BQA helps improve the whole production cycle. Consumers ask more questions, and producers who go through BQA have excellent stories to tell.

"The United States is known for producing the highest-quality, safest beef in the world, and that is a lot to do with the dedication of the farmers and ranchers who raise our product. It's also because of the education and competency that they get from the Beef Quality Assurance program," he says.





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(which includes his blog), and Bud Williams' wife Eunice maintains their website at stockmanship.com. Gill mentioned that Tom Noffsinger puts on demonstrations and clinics, and pointed out there are numerous others conducting training and encouraging others to understand and adopt more effective stockmanship skills. The BQA website, www.bqa.org, is a great warehouse of tools for the industry, although other training material is available from other sources.

Benefits of stockmanship

Gill asserts that if you are good at stockmanship, all the other aspects on the ranch get easier. Plus, there are several economic benefits to implementing sound stockmanship. The average daily gain improves in cattle, particularly in the growing and weaning calves. He says you can see a significant impact on the immune system because you are minimizing stress, in addition to teaching the cattle to learn how to handle stress. Plus, when cattle are under less stress, they express a better temperament overall.

Gill says they have seen an improved conception rate and maintenance of pregnancy in cows using improved stockmanship methods. He notes that those are generally subtle responses to stress — people don't often think of handling methods

affecting pregnancy — but they are certainly important.

"If you understand behavior, you can simplify your facility's design. You can use more of your ability as a stockman to get cattle to do something, rather than engineer that response through equipment. This can result in significant savings, especially with fewer facility repairs," he explains.

While economical savings are major factors, quality of life for all involved should not be forgotten.

"Profit is the main driver for everything, because if we're not profitable, everything else is going to fall apart. After profit, then you have the quality of life aspects — but without quality of life, there is no profit. It's a holistic deal, it all works together. To me, when you are in charge of caring for an animal and they come in our care, it is our duty to give that animal the best care that you can, no matter what," explains Pate. "If we look at it from a profit standpoint, it makes it so much easier to implement that good care. I'm not really a profit-minded guy, but if you can't maintain a profit, you can't stay in business to give that care."

Additionally, when you use stockmanship methods, relationships are better between family members or employees. It also increases safety for older family members as cattle are much calmer.

Sustainability

While stockmanship mainly focuses on animal handling, Curt Pate, of Curt Pate Stockmanship, says there is a strong environmental aspect to it, too. Just like cattle will tell you where to be if you pay attention, he says Mother Nature does the same thing.

In the big picture, grazing animals maintained a balance in nature by eating grass and leaving a nutrient transfer behind. This nutrient transfer was maintained because there weren't any fences. Bison moved to where the grass was better or moved because of predators, and thus grass was fertilized with their movement. When humans started putting up fences, we lost that nutrient balance, he says.

However, with grazing management practices, we can try to restore that balance, Pate reassures. He says that cattle's main purpose is to be an environmental balancer, and the byproduct is a high-quality protein. Just like we must learn new ways of stockmanship, our grazing practices must continually improve.

This continuous improvement is necessary to keep consumers happy. Consumers are worried about the beef industry's future, says Pate, and the only way to thrive as an industry is to give the consumers what they want. Consumers want to know how cattle are cared for and that they were raised in an environmentally sustainable way.

Pate emphasizes, "Grazing cattle are here as a part of the holistic balance of the environment, and we are learning and getting better at managing our cattle to improve the environment. Animal handling is such a big part of that."

He charges stockmen, and young people especially, to look toward the future and combine animal care with environmental sustainability.

"If you learn how to create that balance, you'll have a very profitable future, as well as a very fulfilling future," he says. "You'll be saving the world through real means, not just make believe — it's real."

"Whenever there is conflict, the quality of life is not as high as when there is harmony. So if we learn to work our cattle in harmony, it seems it has to improve the quality of life. Now when I say harmony, I don't mean sing Kum-ba-yah to the cows," Pate jokes. "When everything is working together, that's harmony, and that improves the quality of life for everybody involved."