

Handle with Care

Good or bad, we teach cattle something every time we handle them.

by *Dave Sjeklocha, DVM*

It has been said that you should work cattle together before you are married so you get the chance to see the “real” person. While there may be some truth to that, it doesn’t have to be that way. Handling cattle can be frustrating at times, but the key to understanding why cattle can be frustrating is to realize we have probably taught them to be that way. If you take one thing away from reading this article, I hope it is that we teach cattle each time we interact with them.

Good cattle handling facilities are important, but effective cattle handlers are just as important. Someone who understands cattle behavior can make almost any facility work, while a bad cattle handler can make a wreck of the best-designed facility. In a cow herd

situation, it is especially important to focus on cattle behavior and how to respond to it because those cows will be with you for, hopefully, many years. So, when we handle the cow herd: 1) Try to make it a good experience for the cows; 2) Don’t teach the cows any bad habits.

Common cattle handling mistakes

An example of teaching a bad habit comes from whom I call the “sifter.” This is the person who needs six cows to go to the single-file alleyway but tries to push 20 head to the alleyway, hoping to have six left when they finally get there. In this example, the sifter taught 14 cows that they can get away; it will now be far more difficult to get those 14 cows to go where you want. If

the sifter works cattle all day like this, the entire herd will be trained to escape. It is far better to take the number you need and then do everything you can to make sure they all go where you want them to go. If a good cattle handler must work with a herd that has experience with a sifter, the good cattle handler will have to re-train those cows to understand that they cannot escape.

Another common mistake when handling cattle is overfilling the tub/Bud Box. I am a firm believer that we should never bring so many cattle to the tub that we have cattle standing in the tub, waiting for their turn to enter the alleyway. This is especially true when a Bud Box is used. Bring only enough cattle to fill the alleyway. Get them in, and get them out. The

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tub, alleyway and squeeze chute are the most stressful areas for cattle as we work them, so it just makes sense to minimize the time each animal must spend in those areas. Plus, it really helps smooth the flow of cattle through the system.

A common facility design flaw is using a backstop or “no-back” device at the end of the alleyway, right where we are trying to encourage cattle to exit the tub/Bud Box and enter the alleyway. Cattle are more likely to balk at entering the alleyway when it appears the backstop is blocking their path. Moving the backstop forward one or two animal lengths can improve the flow of cattle into the alleyway. Once they start down the alley, herdmates behind will help continue to move them forward. If moving the backstop forward is not an option, creating a pulley system to pull the backstop out of the way can be very effective.

Break your bad habits

Keep in mind an electric prod is an essential tool for only very specific

situations. These situations are rare, and even then, prods should only be used when absolutely necessary. If a worker constantly carries one, it will be overused. Workers must be willing to put the prod down and retrieve it only when necessary.

We often see the whole family helping to work cattle on farms and ranches, which is a great opportunity for teaching work ethic, responsibility, integrity — and maybe a little crusty language! I started working cattle with my dad when I was 5 or 6 years old, and I was expected to contribute. My job was to keep the cows moving up the alley to the chute, but Dad didn’t want me to stick my arm in the alley to encourage the cows. So, if I couldn’t get the cattle to move by stepping toward them or walking past them, I was to use the electric prod. Using the prod kept me safe as a youngster, but it wasn’t until I was older that I realized I developed a habit of overuse. Especially when family members and neighbors help work cattle, make sure everyone

understands how to move cattle appropriately, as well as when and why to use an electric prod.

These are just a few very common and easily overlooked issues I see when cattle are worked.

In the book, “The Horse Whisperer,” someone says to the main character, Tom Booker, “I’ve heard you help people with horse problems.”

“Truth is, I help horses with people problems,” Booker replies.

The same philosophy applies to cattle. Remember, we are constantly teaching cattle how to respond to us. Make sure to teach them the right way to respond. We must break our own bad habits, and we must ensure we are not teaching the cattle any bad habits. **BA**

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