

News Column
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LIVESTOCK PSYCHOLOGY

One of my Facebook friends is a proponent of low-stress cattle handling and frequently posts pictures, and sometimes videos, of their crew working cattle. In every picture the cattle appear to be calm and content. In the videos, both the cattle and the handlers are quiet.

As I age, I seem to have a greater appreciation for calm and quiet. I have gathered cattle the hard way, fast and furious, and I have moved cattle the easy way, led by a pickup baited with alfalfa hay. I can't recall fast ever being faster, so I have come to believe that slow and easy is the fastest way to handle livestock.

One of my earliest childhood memories is trailing a set of black Angus cows back home from the south pasture, ten miles by road. I was probably five years old, which would have made my brothers seven and nine. It was just Dad, Mom, and the three of us boys.

Dad must have still been Superman at age 35 because I can't quite figure out how he made this deal work. Mom was a great mom, but I only remember one other time that she helped with farm work. With my oldest brother being nine, he was probably pretty capable. The middle brother was always a runner, so he had the stamina to walk the whole ten miles. But me? I'm guessing I was just in the way.

Good help is a plus, but it doesn't always take a lot of help to move livestock if you know what you're doing. Essentially, you need to figure out what the animals want to do, and go with it. Or, find a way to make them want to do what you want them to do.

If you think about it, handling livestock is really no different from managing people. When I worked with my dad, I had to figure out how to make my ideas his ideas. Then I could have my way. Now, the same principle applies to raising kids. When I need them to do something, I have to let my kids think it was their idea, or at least decide my idea is a better option than the other bad options I might offer.

Animals work the same way as people. Lay things out so they only have a few options, give them some space, and let them make the choice you want them to make.

I have experience with cattle, hogs, and sheep. I make no claim to being an expert in handling any of them, but I assure you that I have worked enough livestock to need to break myself twice of using a few special livestock handling words.

I've been kicked. I've been stepped on. I've been run over by a ewe and run under by a sow. I have been bitten by pigs, hooked with a tusk by a boar, butted by a ram, pooped on, snotted on, and slimed with birthing fluids. I may be sitting in an office now, but I've been out a time or two, so I feel comfortable offering a few bits of wisdom about livestock handling.

Here are a just a few of my thoughts.

- Practice — If you're going to be working cattle on foot, get out and walk through them periodically. Lead them, or herd them into the holding pen and through the working facilities to get them used to their surroundings.
- Study and learn — Google low-stress handling and watch some videos. Knowing where to stand, and knowing how close to be to make cattle move is an art that needs to be learned through practice, but you can pick up some great tips online.
- If it doesn't work, change something — Animals like to go back to where they came from. So, if you're driving livestock up to a holding pen, then on through to working

facilities, it might not be so easy. Set the working facilities so your cattle can come back toward them after being placed in a holding pen. If your setup doesn't work, don't keep pushing. Instead, stop and make a change.

- Go slow — Quick movements, running, and hollering just make the job harder. Slow down.
- Handle fewer animals at a time — Once you have everything in the holding pen, move just three or four into your crowding pen. From there, you should be able to easily move them down the working alley one at a time.
- Get rid of the crazies — If a crazy cow still wants to run over you once you've slowed down and learned to do your job right, she needs to go to town. It's the best decision you'll make all year.
- Get rid fo the crazies, part 2 — If someone in your normal crew likes to slam gates, whoop and holler, beat on animals with a stick, or constantly wants to use a hotshot, they need to go too. Some can be re-trained, but others should just never be invited back.

Good luck with your fall cattle work, and please remember that slower is always safer,.... except when you're bailing over the fence to get away from a crazed cow or an attacking boar. Been there. Moved really fast! Lived to tell about it.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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