

CATTLE BEHAVIOR— GET A HANDLE ON IT!

There is an old saying “You can tell what kind of a stock man a person is by looking at the behavior of his cattle.”

By Temple Grandin

An understanding of cattle psychology combined with well designed facilities will reduce stress on both you and your cattle.

Reducing stress is important because stress reduces the ability to fight disease and weight gain. It also increases shrink, damages rumen function, and can interfere with reproduction. An animal's previous experiences will affect its stress reaction to handling.

Cattle have long memories. Animals which have been handled roughly will be more stressed and difficult to handle in the future. Animals which are handled gently and have become accustomed to handling procedures will have very little stress when handled.

There is an old saying “You can tell what kind of a stock man a person is by looking at the behavior of his cattle.” In one feedlot survey, cattle from yards which had a reputation for rough handling were wilder and more difficult to handle at the packer. They also had more bruises.

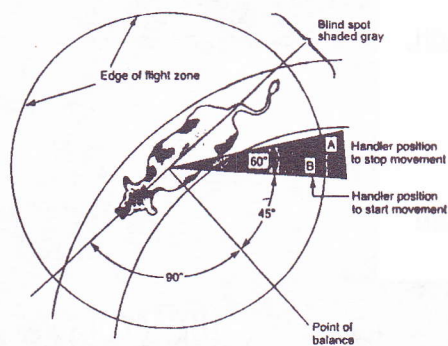
Although painful procedures cannot be avoided, a reduction of agitation and excitement will still reduce stress. Cattle remember painful restraint

methods such as nosetongs. Handling will be easier in the future if you use a halter to hold the heads and keep electric prod usage to an absolute minimum.

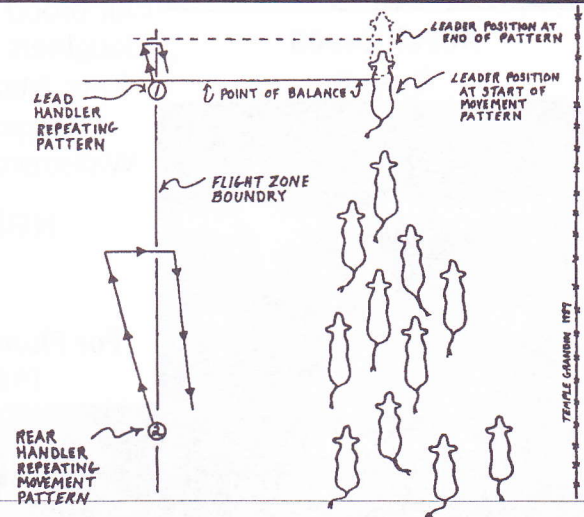
BEHAVIOR PRINCIPLES

Cattle have wide angle vision. They can see behind themselves without turning their heads. However, there is a small blind spot behind their rear (Diagram 1). When a group of cattle moves, the animals maintain visual contact with each other. This enables the herd to stay together. An animal following another animal will tend to stay in Positions A and B on Diagram 1.

Understanding the flight zone is the key to easy, quiet handling. The flight zone is the cow's personal space. When you penetrate the flight zone, the animals will move, and when you retreat from the flight zone, the animals will stop moving. The size of the flight zone is determined by several factors, such as wildness or tameness, and the angle of the handler's approach. The flight zone will be larger when a handler approaches head on, and it will become smaller when the animal is confined inside a single file chute. A cow passing



1. Flight zone diagram.



2. Handler positions to move groups of cattle on pasture.

by you will have a smaller flight zone. If a cow becomes excited, the flight zone will increase. Cattle can be easily moved by working on the edge of the flight zone (Diagram 1). The handler must be close enough to the animal to make it move, but not so close as to cause it to panic and flee. If the cattle start moving too fast, you must back off and get out of the flight zone.

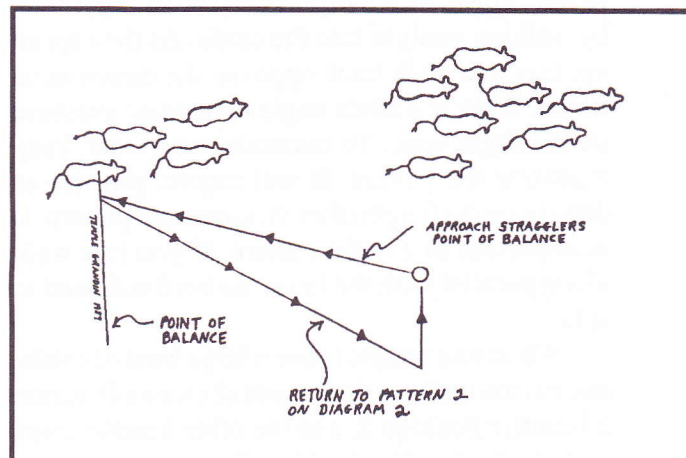
If cows on pasture turn and look at you, you need to approach and put pressure on the edge of the flight zone. To keep the animals moving, you alternately enter and retreat from the flight zone. When an animal moves for you, you reward her by relieving pressure on her flight zone, but in a few seconds, you will invade her flight zone again to keep her going.

When cattle are worked in an enclosed space such as an alley or crowd pen, great care must be taken to avoid deeply penetrating the flight zone. This can result in panic, jumped fences and cattle turning back on the handler. If cattle in an alley start to turn back, you must back up and get out of the flight zone. When an animal rears up in a chute, retreat from its flight zone, nine times out of ten, it will settle back down.

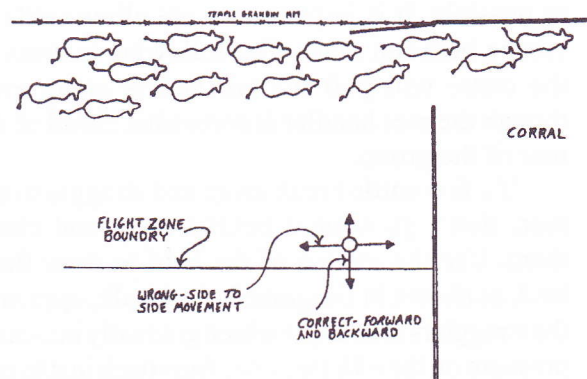
BREAK OLD HABITS

You must break old habits to fully master quiet gathering of cattle from the pasture. The first habit to break is whooping, hollering and running. It will require some time and patience, but your cattle will become quieter and easier to handle as you work with them. The second bad habit is chasing cattle from the rear of the group. Positioning yourself behind the cattle puts you in their blind spot. This will cause them to turn and look at you, unless they are scared and fleeing from you. Cattle movements should be under the handler's control and the animals move at a slow walk. You have to concentrate on moving the leaders.

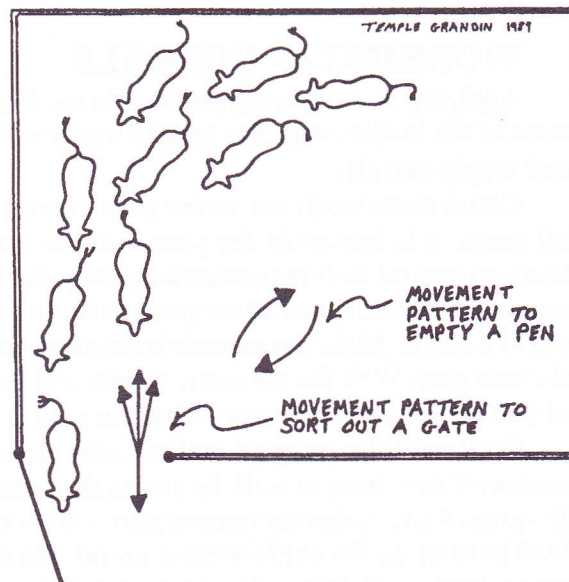
A herd of cattle is like a car. Before you can steer, the car must be moving. Herd movement must be started before you attempt to change direction. Diagram 2 shows the handler movement pattern which will keep a herd moving in an orderly manner. It will work both along a fence and in open pasture. If a single handler is moving the animals, use the Handler 2 Position of Diagram 2. As the herd moves, you walk forward at an angle which gradually relieves pressure on the herd's collective flight zone. When the animals start



3. Handler positions to bring stragglers back into the herd.



4. Leader handler position for filling corral.



5. Handler positions for emptying a pen and sorting at a gate.

to slow down, increase pressure on the flight zone by walking straight into the cattle. As they speed up, turn and walk back opposite the direction of travel. Walk at a slight angle to increase pressure on the flight zone. To maintain movement, keep repeating the pattern. It will require practice to determine the length of each movement pattern. It is important to use the pattern. If you just walk along parallel with the herd, the herd will tend to split.

When two people move a large herd of cattle, one person walks in the pattern shown on Diagram 2 Handler Position 2, and the other handler stays with the leader. The lead handler should stay just behind the leader's point of balance. He should bear in and out of the flight zone in an alternating manner (Diagram 2, Position 1). The lead handler and the rear handler should stay as close together as possible. It is important to not allow cattle to escape between them. The following instinct of the cattle will pull the tail enders along even though the rear handler is somewhat ahead of the rear of the group.

If a few cattle break away and straggle to the rear, don't go around behind them and chase them. Use the motion of the herd to draw them back as shown in Diagram 3. At a walk, approach the stragglers at an angle which gradually increases pressure on their flight zone. Approach just to one side of their heads and move just past the point of balance at the shoulder. Do not go all the way to Positions A and B on Diagram 1. As soon as the stragglers are attracted by the movement of the herd, start repeating the Handler 2 pattern on Diagram 2.

WORKING IN CORRALS

Applying and relieving pressure to the flight zone of the leaders will also make it easier to fill and empty corrals.

Cattle movements are under your control at all times. It is important for your cattle to learn that you control their movements and they cannot escape from you. Never allow cattle to run wildly out of a corral. Make the animals walk past you at the exit gate. Wait for the cattle to turn and look at you before you walk away from the gate.

Cattle will also enter a corral in a more orderly manner if they have to walk by you as they enter. Diagram 4 illustrates the correct position for the lead handler as the cattle enter a corral. Do not move back and forth. Increase and decrease

pressure on the flight zone by moving forward and back, straight into the herd. You must apply enough pressure to keep them from veering away from the fence, but not so much as to cause panic.

When you move animals from a pen, do not let them race out. Work on the flight zone of the leaders. Diagram 5 shows the movement pattern for emptying a pen and for sorting at a gate. To empty the pen in a controlled manner, move back and forth as shown in Diagram 5. To control the movement of the cattle out a gate, move to the sorting position shown on Diagram 5. To sort cattle, move forward and backward. Do not move sideways. If you move sideways, they will get by you. By moving forward and backward, you can easily separate cows from calves. You increase pressure on the flight zone of the animal you want to hold back and decrease pressure on the flight zone of the animals you wish to let go by. This method can be used either in an alley or in a gate.

When cattle are being handled in a confined area such as a crowding pen or sorting alley, handle small groups. Bring eight or 10 cattle into a crowding pen instead of 20. The animals need room to turn. Use the animal's natural following behavior to assist with filling chutes. Wait until the single file to the squeeze is almost empty before refilling. Avoid the overuse of crowd gates. If the cattle are moving, do not shove the crowd gate up on them.

Problems with balking tend to come in bunches; when one animal balks, the tendency to balk seems to spread to the next animals in line. When an animal is being moved through a single-file chute, the animal must never be prodded until it has a place to go. Once it has balked, it will continue balking. The handler should wait until the tailgate on the squeeze chute is open before prodding the next animal.

An animal left alone in the crowding pen after the other animals have entered the single-file chute, may attempt to jump the fence to rejoin its herdmates. A lone steer or cow may become agitated and charge the handler. A large portion of the serious handler injuries occur when a steer or cow, separated from its herdmates, refuses to walk up the single-file chute. When a lone animal refuses to move, the handler should release it from the crowding pen and bring it back with another group of cattle. ■