

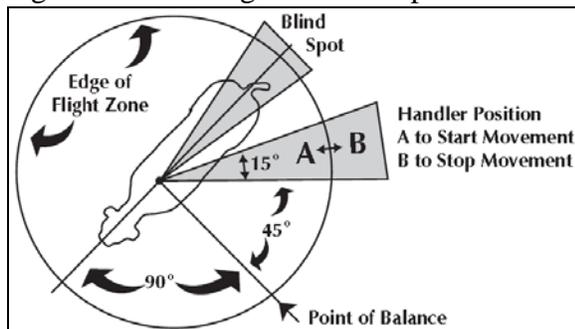
The Importance of Proper Cattle Handling

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For many beef producers, cattle working is often a time that is remembered by dirty jeans, muddy boots, and someone getting angry and yelling at someone or some cow. While this yelling and excitement may often seem like the norm, it creates added stress on the cattle themselves. For livestock, stress has been shown to have negative impacts on health and performance, both on the hoof and on the rail. When we consider ways to reduce or eliminate stress, we often think of reducing the stress of weaning through a pre-conditioning program, providing enough feed or forage so calves aren't under a nutritional stress, but we may not consider stress inflicted during routine handling.

The first and perhaps most important point to understand in cattle handling involves getting to know the principles of an animal's behavior, or why that cow reacts the way she does when we attempt to push her through a working chute. The diagram shown in Figure 1 demonstrates an animal's point of balance and flight zone. When a person is standing behind the point of balance, the animal will move forward, while when a person is standing in front of the point of balance an animal will move backward. It is also important to note the animal's blind spot. When a handler stands directly behind an animal, that animal cannot see the person due to the way their eyes are positioned. If a handler is standing in an animal's blind spot, that calf may attempt to turn around to see what is behind them. By using an animal's point of balance to your advantage, it may greatly reduce the amount of stress involved in working, for both human and cow.

Figure 1. Cattle flight zone and point of balance



Another important point of animal behavior to understand is an animal's flight zone. Depending on the calf's adaptation to humans and handling, the flight zone can vary from zero to over 1,000 feet. An animal that is completely tame, such as an old show heifer, may have no flight zone, and allow someone to walk directly up to her without moving. In her case it may be better to lead her to the working pens rather than try to drive her. On the other hand, if a cow has not had much human interaction or has been handled roughly, she may have a very large flight zone, and will run when a human gets within several hundred feet of her.

There are some minor adjustments that can be made in the working routine that can have major impacts on reducing stress as well. One very important point is no yelling. It has been found in numerous research studies that loud yelling and loud whistling near an animal's ear is as stressful as an electric prod. Loud noises such as yelling or banging on a fence often frighten animals, and

can work against the handler, by getting cattle stirred up and excited. One way to gauge this is by the handler's own level of stress or excitement. If the handler is very upset or stressed, it is likely that the cattle are stressed as well. Calm cattle are much easier to sort, and move through a working facility.

Removing distractions from the working facility is also a key point. Often cattle will balk or refuse to move past objects that we humans may not even notice. Common distractions that go unnoticed include jackets or clothing hanging on a fence or a loose chain hanging down in an alley. It is important to walk through your chute and facility beforehand to search for potential distractions and remove them. Some common distractions that we might not consider include flooring type and lighting. Cattle tend to balk at objects that are high contrast. This might include floor surface changing from concrete to dirt or going from bright sunlight outside to a dark covered working facility. Solid chute sides can also prevent some balking. When cattle can see people or objects ahead when entering a chute, they will likely refuse to enter.

Below is a list of some additional helpful tips that may reduce stress during cattle handling

- Measure handling: cattle that fall should be 2% or less, electric prod use should be limited to 10% or less, cattle moving faster than a walk when entering or exiting the squeeze should be 25% or less, percent of cattle vocalizing during handling should be 5% or less
- Use proper, maintained facilities: Be sure facilities are in proper working order before cattle enter
- Familiarize cattle with facilities: Cattle often balk or hesitate at the unknown
- Work cattle in groups: Cattle are calmer when handled or moved as a group
- Prevent noise and distractions: This includes distractions from handlers as well as objects
- Remove sharp objects: Cattle can easily injure themselves when moving through a working facility
- Be sure handlers are experienced and trained: Handlers should be familiar with the concepts of low stress handling
- Stay alert and calm: Keeping handler calm also aids in keeping cattle calm
- Limit use of prods: Electric prods should only be used when necessary and only at the entrance to the chute.
- Prevent backing and turning in working chute: Be sure the area leading to the chute is narrow enough that the animals cannot turn around.

While often times it may be difficult to change mindset when it comes to how we approach cattle handling, it may ultimately pay dividends. By tweaking several minor parts of our cattle working mentality, the process can be made safer and less stressful for animals and humans alike.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.