

Low-Stress Cattle Handling



The Principles of Low-Stress Handling

Skilled and experienced stockpeople move cattle quietly and with ease. They have learned to understand and anticipate cattle behaviour and how to use this behaviour to effectively move them. Low-stress handling aims to help facilitate a better understanding between cattle and stockpeople. This helps ensure cattle are cooperative and manageable.

Having all farm staff trained and practicing low-stress handling is a proAction® requirement, and is the safest form of handling for both humans and animals.

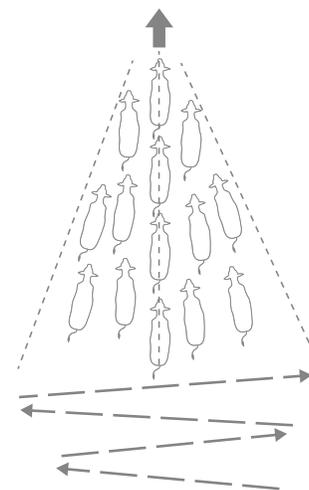
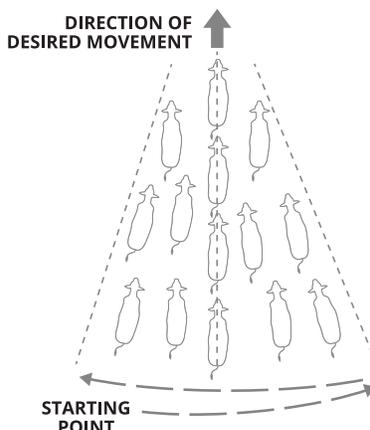
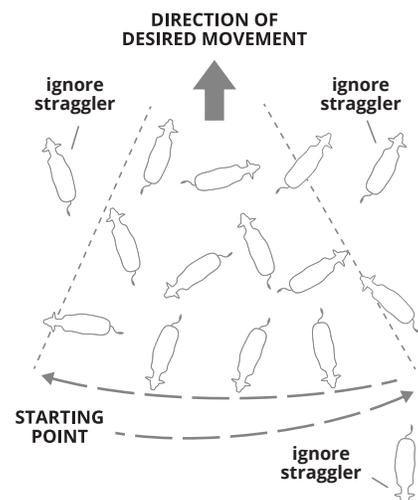
There are several keys to low-stress handling that anyone handling cattle should be familiar with:

- The cow's perspective (vision, blind spot, herd mentality, behavioural signs)
- Flight zone
- Point of balance

The Cow's Perspective

Vision

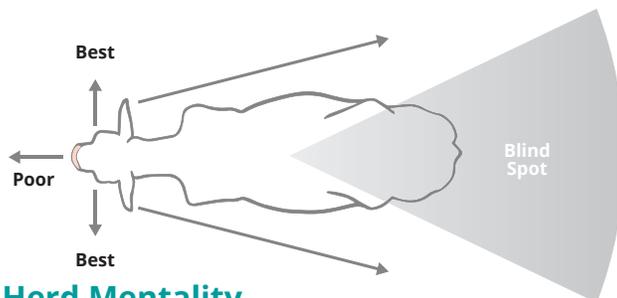
As herd animals, cattle have a panoramic field of vision. This means that they can see much of their surroundings without moving their heads to watch for potential threats. However, they are easily spooked by novel items in their path, deep shadows, and people that approach too quickly.



Blind Spot

While cattle are able to see approximately 300° around them, they cannot see directly behind them. The area directly behind them is their blind spot. They can become nervous when they know a potential threat has entered this area.

Remember: If a human were to stand in this blind spot, cattle will stop moving and turn to bring the person into their line of sight.



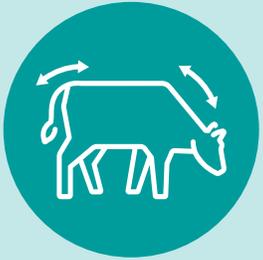
Herd Mentality

Cattle prefer to move as a herd. Cows will naturally follow a leader and stick with their group. Be mindful that they are nervous of new situations and unfamiliar objects. Practice patience and move animals at a slow walk. Animals that become nervous or excited are unpredictable and difficult to move, which increases their risk of slipping and falling. If handling an excited animal, take a moment to slow down, step back, and re-evaluate.

Ensure that when moving groups into pens and/or trailers, there is sufficient space for cattle to move freely. Tightly bunched animals can fall and/or become injured, particularly if they have no room to regain their footing.

Behavioural Signs

Watch for signs of defensive or aggressive behaviours in cattle to prevent human and animal safety risks, such as:



Changes to head and tail positions



Ear and tail flicking



Bellowing



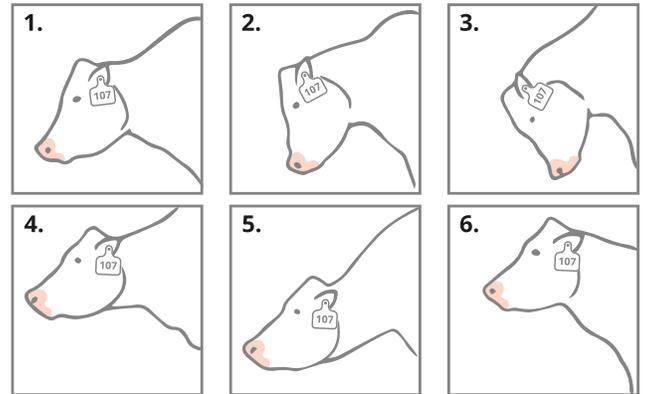
Erratic movements



Pawing

It is also important to be mindful of what different head positions mean, as seen in the diagram below:

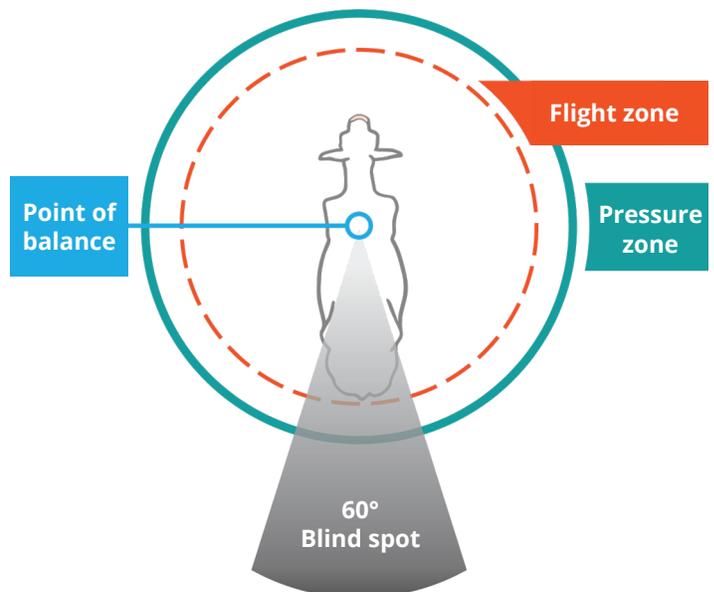
1. Neutral
2. Slightly antagonistic
3. Highly antagonistic
4. Confident
5. Submissive
6. Alert before flight



Flight Zone

Animals have a flight zone, or an area around them that, when a person enters this zone, the animal will instinctively move away. The size of the flight zone will vary widely across individual animals.

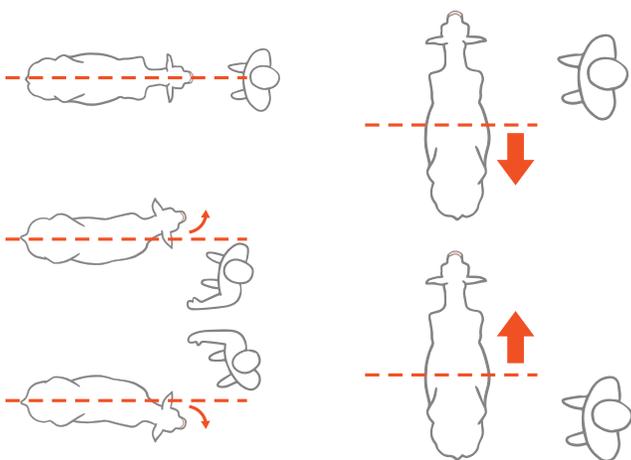
Remember: When a person enters the flight zone of an animal, the animal will move in the opposite direction of the perceived threat.



Point of Balance

The point of balance, located at an animal's shoulder, is the point where an animal will determine if it should move forward or backward when a perceived threat (e.g. you) enters its flight zone.

For example: If you were to stand forward of the point of balance, the animal would move backward, away from you. If you moved behind the animal's point of balance, the animal would move forward, directly away from you.



You Manage What You Measure

The effect of animal handling can be measured. Assess your animal handling facilities — properly designed handling facilities are an important factor in low-stress handling. Watch handler techniques, and review your training procedures if needed. When moving groups of animals (i.e. moving calves from hutches, moving cattle for hoof trimming, moving cows to the parlour), consider revisiting low-stress cattle handling techniques if:

- **More than 5% of animals balk (i.e. stop and have to be encouraged to move)**
- **More than 1% of animals lose their footing, slip, or stumble**
- **More than 1% of animals fall on the ground**

While this does not need to be a formal exercise, it is easy to identify if 1 out of 10 animals that you are handling balks, slips, or falls. If this occurs, consider evaluating facilities and handling techniques.

Other Reminders for Animal Handling

Remember, training for animal handling is a proAction® requirement. Practice patient, low-stress handling with animals of all ages.

Handlers should never display aggressive or aversive behaviour. They should speak softly (no yelling), and wait for cattle to move forward (no need to prod, shove, or hit an animal). Use the field of vision, point of balance, and flight zone to guide cattle. Be aware that using skid steers or tractors can excite cattle and make them anxious so they are not acceptable forms of handling. Dogs can also excite cattle and cause injury and should be kept away from cattle if they are not trained in herding and easily controlled.

Electric Prods

Cattle must be handled without the use of electric prods whenever possible. The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle (published in 2009) states that electric prods should only be used under extreme situations where animal safety is at risk. As an example, an electric prod may be used once on a down adult animal as a last resort to assess if she has the ability to rise. When they must be used, they should only be used on the rump; **never use them on the face, anus, or reproductive organs of dairy cattle.**



Prods cannot be used on animals that can be moved manually! Prods cannot be used on calves that can be lifted.

Restraint for Treatments

For the safety of the animals and handlers, animals periodically need to be restrained for administration of treatments or procedures such as hoof trimming or veterinary assessments.

Animals must only be restrained for as long as necessary for the treatment, examination, or procedure required. Restraint devices should not cause injury or stress to animals. Plan ahead and prepare equipment to reduce the time an animal is required to be restrained.

References

1. Grandin T. (2012) *Recommended Animal Handling Guidelines & Audit Guide: A Systematic Approach to Animal Welfare*. Washington, DC: AMI Foundation.



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