Effective stockmanship reduces livestock stress

When livestock are handled in ways that minimize stress, it not only benefits their welfare but also improves efficiency and safety for humans.

What is stockmanship?

Stockmanship revolves around understanding and respecting the natural behavior of animals, and using this knowledge to effectively work livestock, whether changing pastures or processing them through a chute for doctoring, branding, or shipping.

Good stockmanship and low-stress handling techniques help ensure the safety of both livestock and handlers on any farm or ranch, regardless of herd size. By understanding the natural instincts of cattle and other herd animals and employing these principles, handlers can foster a calmer, safer, and more productive environment, whether in a backyard herd of a few head or a ranch with 4,000 cattle.

With cattle, there are four foundational principles that guide effective stockmanship. In many cases, these principles can be applied to other livestock as well.

Principles of stockmanship

1. Cattle want to see you. As prey animals, cattle and other livestock are highly attuned to their environment, particularly to any movement. When working cattle in closed spaces, you may have noticed they always have an eye on you to be sure they are not in danger.

Cattle get nervous when they cannot see their surroundings or other cattle. Their vision spans almost 310 degrees, meaning they can see nearly all around them except for a small blind spot directly behind them. This wide field of vision plays a key role in how they respond to handlers. Like most predators, humans have binocular vision, meaning our eyes face directly forward. Cattle that are unaccustomed to humans have an innate instinct to be wary or afraid of us.

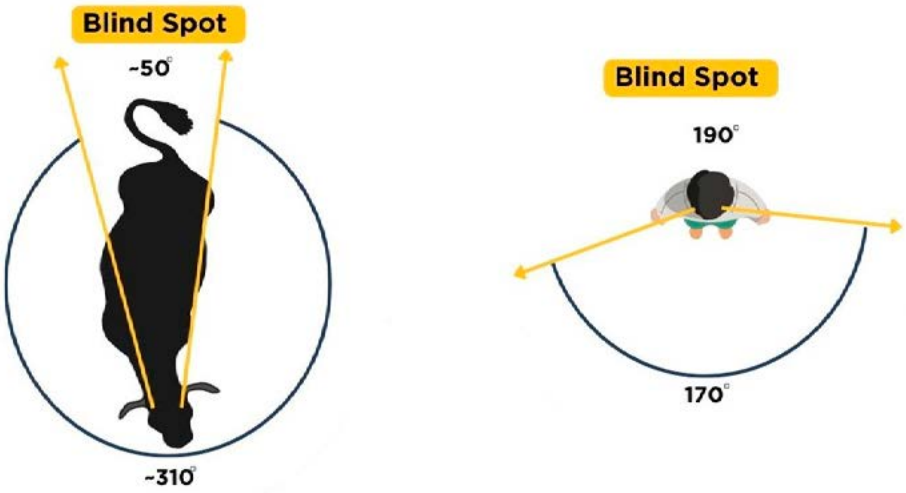
2. Cattle want to go around you. The flight zone is the space around a cow that, when entered by a handler, prompts the animal to move away until you are once again outside of it. Cattle naturally try to move away from pressure. If a handler is in their flight zone, cattle will seek to go around the handler, ideally behind them, to escape the pressure. This applies to people on foot, on horseback, or in a vehicle, as well as to stock dogs.

3. Cattle want to be with other cattle. As herd animals, cattle are very gregarious and derive comfort and security from being in a group. Isolating a single animal or separating bonded pairs, like a cow and her calf, can create significant stress and complicate handling. Cattle will try their best to get back to their herd, even if that herd is just one other animal.

When animals are separated and cannot locate their herd mates, they will try to go back to the last place they saw them. This is especially true for cow-calf pairs. A calf will run miles just to get back to where it last was with its mother. This instinct can be utilized effectively to work livestock, if done correctly. For example, animals might be gently moved into a smaller corral with an alley or other pens they can move into when the gate is closed behind them. As they instinctively attempt to move back to where they just were, they can flow into the alley or other pens.

However, if this method is applied incorrectly, cattle will become stressed, leading to production issues, frantic behavior, and potential aggression.

4. Cattle have long memories. Once livestock experience a negative situation, such as a chaotic handling environment or excessive use of an electric prod, they are likely to remember and anticipate these stressors in the future. Consistently working animals in a calm, controlled manner helps avoid creating long-lasting negative associations. Some small-scale livestock owners find it beneficial to run cattle through a chute or into a small pen every so often and reward them with feed or a quick way back to the herd. Ideally, the cattle will remember this as a low-stress experience when they need to be brought in for processing or working.



Cattle have a wide field of vision, spanning nearly 310 degrees. In contrast, humans have binocular vision.

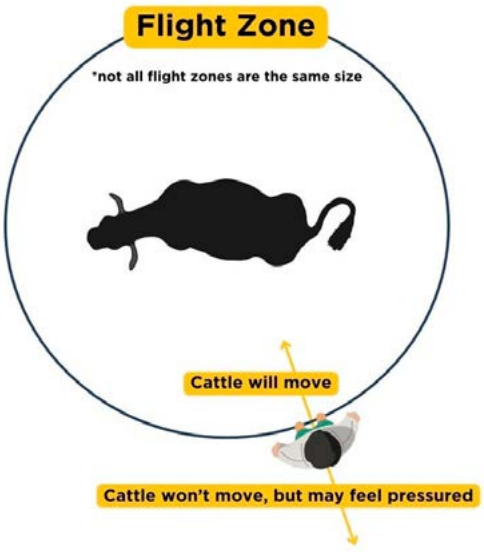
Understanding your stock's behavior

Cattle's responses to handling are driven by both innate and learned behaviors. Whether in a pasture or confined environment like a dry lot, their reactions to human presence are primarily based on their need to maintain visibility and avoid perceived threats.

All herd animals have social structures within a herd, often forming smaller groups of 10–20 individuals that maintain close bonds. These groups provide a sense of stability, so any disruption—such as separating bonded pairs or introducing new animals—can cause stress. In confined spaces, this social structure can be disrupted further, especially if animals are unable to maintain their preferred distances from more dominant herd members.

In crowded and new feedlot environments, such as a pen, livestock are removed from their usual social structures, leading to competition for space and resources. This lack of space to form and maintain stable social groups can create ongoing stress, especially for more submissive animals.

If livestock must be brought into a tight space alone or in small groups, it is best to make the experience as brief as possible. Never contain an animal for long periods where it cannot interact with, or at least see, other members of its kind.



If a handler is in their flight zone, cattle will move away to escape the pressure.

Low-stress livestock handling

When working and moving animals, there is always some element of stress. However, by practicing good stockmanship, you can improve both the efficiency of your operation and the comfort of your animals. Livestock that feel safe and content inevitably are more productive than those that are scared and worked up.

For example, research shows that growing cattle tend to gain weight and maintain weight at better rates when stress levels are low compared to animals that are stressed due to frequent movement, fear, or harassment. Reproducing females also tend to be bred and stay pregnant better when they are not stressed.

Understanding the basics of good stockmanship is the critical first step for low-stress livestock work. In the next issue of *Barnyards & Backyards*, we will take a closer look at low-stress handling techniques and facility design, as well as examine how these tools can help prevent overexciting the herd.

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Images courtesy of Dagan Montgomery.