Stockmanship is the study of the human-animal interactions as well as the accomplishment of low-stress cow handling techniques to get better results for both the people and the cattle. One of the pioneers on this science is Mr. Bud Williams, a leader of good cattle stockmanship. His methods were first implemented in beef cattle and raised the possibility of their use on dairy operations. The daily management of a dairy operation requires the interaction human-animal many more times a day than beef operations, proving the methods’ use even further.

The main human-animal interaction in a dairy farm is moving cattle from the free-stall to the milking parlor. Instead of simply ‘pushing the cows to the parlor’, stockmanship skills allow cows to understand where we want them to go and will aid in work efficiency, reducing stress on people and cows further minimizing lameness and injury.

The outcome is a calm, quiet and orderly movement of relaxed cows to be milked rapidly and effectively.

To move cows we use pressure-release on their flight zone, the area where they will begin to feel pressure from your presence and respond. Approaching the animal, you will be able to see when you are exerting pressure, stopping back you can release some or all of the pressure.

Then, we can move cows by varying pressure and release according to the distance and angle in relation to the cow. The right way to pressure depends on situation and reading the animal response. For example, too much pressure will make the cows raise their heads and no longer watch where they place their feet, which can cause lameness issues.

The basic instincts of cattle are simple: they want to move in the direction they are headed, they want to follow their herdmates, they want to see who is pressuring them and they want to
return to the place where they came from. Walking with them will tend to slow down or stop them, walking against will tend to speed up them. Walking in straight lines allows our movements to be predictable to the cow. Cows does not have much patience with unclear messages.

Stockmanship allows us to create and control positive motion. Cows must learn to trust the person applying pressure to create, stop and turn motion. The person must learn to trust the cattle will be consistent in their response. Cattle and people can create an effective two-way communication. Cattle will be consistent only if people consistently do the right things. Remember, the cattle are always right and the people must avoid doing the wrong things and be patient.

Observations by experienced dairymen have long told that rough handling and stress are harmful to dairy cattle. People working with dairy cows should have patience and kindness. Not only because the cattle deserve our respect, but also because tame cows produce more milk (Sorge et al., 2014).

Statistical methods have shown that shocking or hitting a cow can reduce milk yield by 10 percent. Animals are able to remember both good and bad experiences. Fear memories cannot be erased easily due to the nature of cows, when they were wild and were preyed upon. Fear memories can be linked to specific places or to a person wearing a certain type of clothing associating with a painful experience. If the first experience of a heifer in the milking parlor is not good, it is unfavorable for milk yield.

An electrical shock or a fall at the first visit in the parlor will develop a fear memory that is going to be associated to the parlor. One of the best ways to introduce cows to a new place is to allow them to voluntarily explore it. Heifers could be allowed to explore and walk around in the parlor before calving.

Young calves which are handled frequently by people, with positive experiences, will grow up into calmer cows with smaller flight distance. A calm calf raiser is important on this process because when the heifers grow up, they can be further tamed by a person walking in their pens every day.

This person could wear the same clothing that the milkers wear, such as a white apron and, of course, keep the same calm behavior which is going to be associated to a nice and safe person. Also, veterinary treatments or reproductive hormone injections never should be given in the milking parlor. Cows need to make sure that this place is always a ‘good’ place for them.

Although dairy farms can vary in size of the herd, type of management and facilities, the fundamental interactions between cows and people are very similar. Thus, anyone working with dairy cows should have training on how to deal with them. Understanding the basic stockmanship principles is just the beginning. We need to know how to interact with the cows and constantly improve our skills. Anyone can learn how to work well with cattle with appropriate patience and willingness to learn the techniques.

“The rules to be observed in this stable at all times, toward the cattle, young and old, is that of patience and kindness. A man’s usefulness in a herd ceases at once when he loses his temper and bestows rough usage. Men must be patient. Cattle are not reasoning beings. Remember that this is the Home of Mothers. Treat each cow as a Mother should be treated. The giving of milk is a function of Motherhood;
rough treatment lessons the flow. That injures me as well as the cow. Always keep these ideas in mind in dealing with my cattle.” – W.D. Hoard.

Our Technical Services team is ready to train stockmanship to your workers in order to reach your goals. Count on us.

Best regards,

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