

Sound Stockmanship - Attitude Precedes Ability

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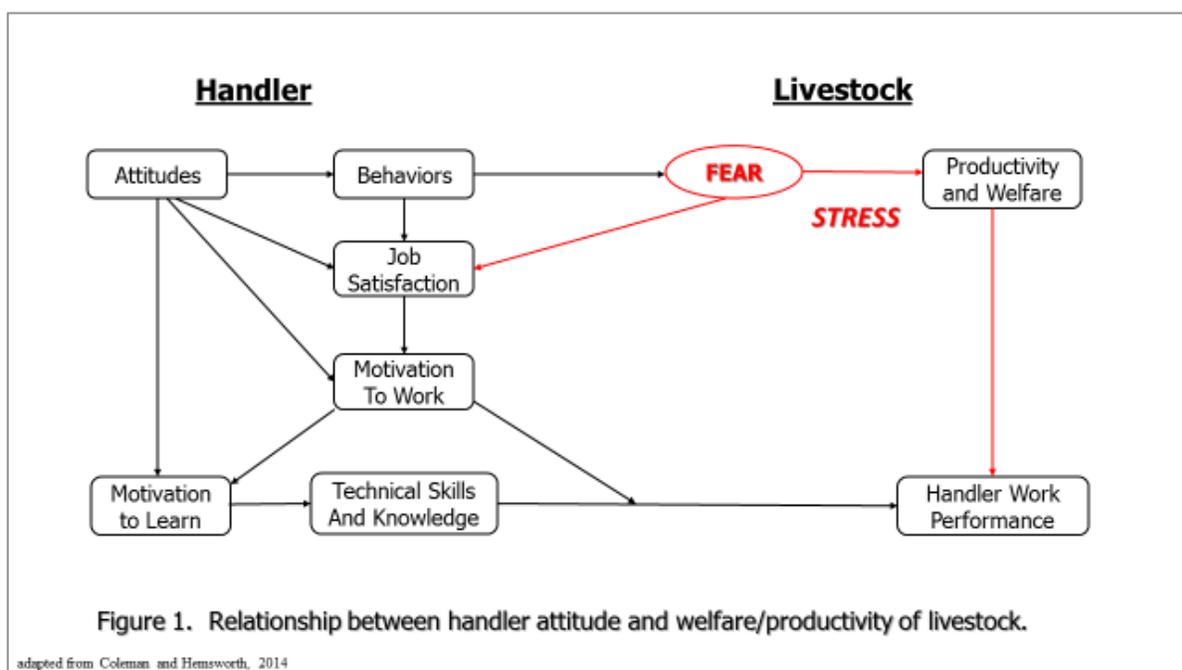
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Consumer awareness and concern regarding the source and production of their food continues to accelerate. The production of animal and avian proteins is certainly (and rightfully so) not exempt from enquiry. However, consumer scrutiny should not and cannot be the sole motivation to improve stockmanship and handling of livestock. Sound and effective stockmanship develops in the presence of a supportive management environment.

For hundreds of years, many in the beef industry have practiced sound stockmanship. Trailing cattle north through the Great Plains required an understanding of cattle behavior and effective handling skills. These skills were developed as a necessity of herding of livestock for grazing prior to the invention of wire fencing. As more and more fencing was in place the need to understand livestock herding diminished. Development of working facilities and construction of facilities out of stronger materials allowed for handling of livestock in any means without the concern of them escaping excess pressure exerted during that process. Over time stockmanship skills have eroded across certain sections of the industry.

Stockmanship advocates (ex. Bud Williams and Temple Grandin) have and continue to teach low stress handling techniques and functional facility design. Schedules seldom allow sufficient time to address all the facets of low stress handling. Participants come with the expectation of learning to handle cattle and improve upon the design/usefulness of their facilities.

A critical prerequisite to effective livestock handling and facility appreciation is attitude and beliefs held by the handler. Australian researchers¹ have graphically captured the relationship between handler attitude and livestock response (Figure 1).



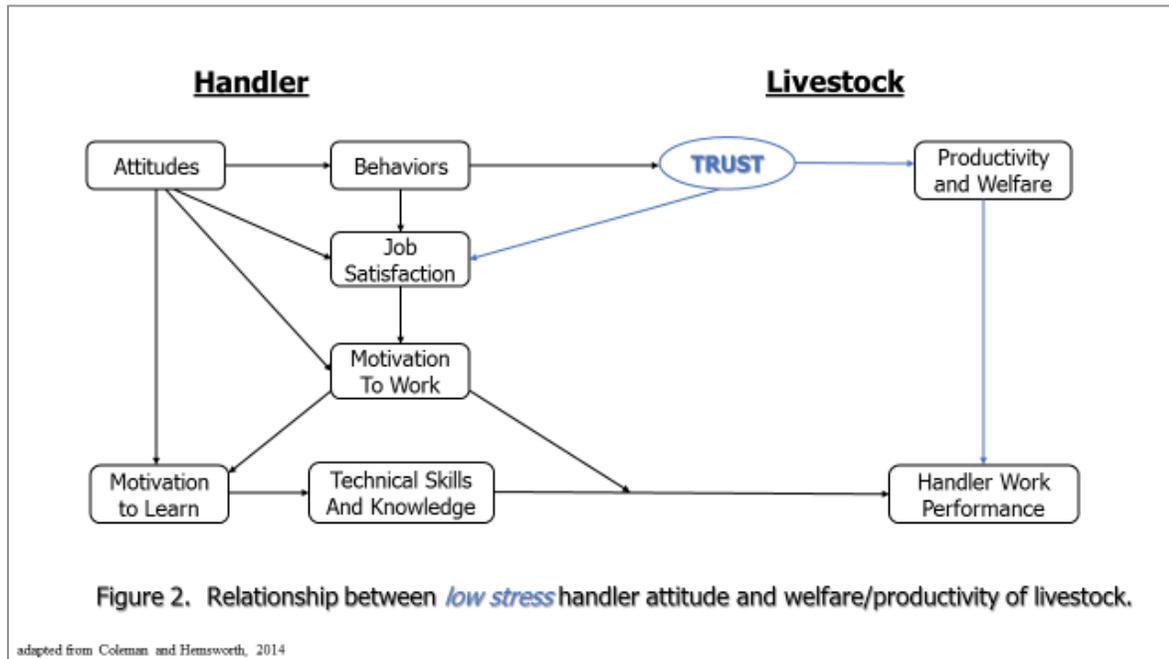
Attitudes are shaped by core beliefs. These core beliefs are cultivated by initial observations, lessons learned and subsequent experiences with livestock. These attitude-shaping core beliefs may or may not be accurate and true. According to The Social Learning Theory by Dr. Albert Bandura, 70% of the skills we have were learned via the informal process of watching and imitating others. Children learn to use a fork and spoon by watching parents. We learned to work livestock by watching those we first saw work stock. According to Dr. Bandura 20% of skill comes from constructive critique/coaching and 10% from formal training (book, video, classroom, etc.). This goes to the core of changing a culture, it is possible to formally instruct and train in the principles of stockmanship but effective stockmanship is learned and reinforced by others watching each other and learning from the successes of those around them. However, only the willing can truly be trained to become an effective stock handler.

Attitudes and handling that do not align with low stress handling techniques result in behaviors that preclude low stress livestock handling (Table 1). In such cases, *behavior modification is a precursor to learning and effective use of low stress handling skills*. Numerous authors make the observation – *the task of changing core beliefs and imbedded behaviors is often more difficult than acquiring low stress handling knowledge and skills*.

<p>Table 1. Core beliefs that are NOT conducive to learning and implementing low stress handling techniques.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I already know how to work livestock. • I have always done it that way. • I have never done it that way. • I can't afford the time to do low stress handling – it takes too long. • I don't have time to stop and learn something new. • My livestock are too wild. • My pens are not set up correctly. • I don't have time [or resources] to modify [or build new] facilities. • Nobody will pay me to practice low stress.

As shown in Figure 1, these beliefs and attitudes influence behaviors. Behavior impacts job satisfaction; as job satisfaction improves, the motivation and willingness to work increases. Those motivated to work are likely also more motivated to learn. Those motivated to work and learn typically adopt and apply new skills and knowledge quickly resulting in improved productivity and animal performance.

Handler behaviors and annoyances (shouting, striking, distracting noises, shadows, barking dogs, etc.) can create confusion and elicit fear in livestock and result in stress. Research studies^{1,2,3} involving an array of animals (poultry, pigs, sheep, dairy and beef cattle) clearly outline the impact of stress on animal productivity and welfare – elevated cortisol levels, increased bruising and injury, lower conception rates, decreased milk production and impaired growth and weight gain. *Stress is counter-productive and inversely related to animal welfare and productivity and job performance by handlers*.



The intention of low stress handling is to cultivate trust between handlers and livestock thereby greatly reducing the stress associated with human interactions (Figure 2). Notice the origin of the relationship between handler and stock is attitude of the handler. In contrast to stress, trust by livestock is directly related to animal welfare and productivity and contributes to job performance by stockmen.

Australian animal welfare experts¹ suggest there are three factors that contribute to livestock handlers performance:

- **Capacity** – includes such variables skills, health, ability and knowledge. Do they have the handling skills and know how to apply them? Are they physically able to work stock?
- **Willingness** – motivation, job satisfaction, attitude towards animals and work attitude. Is animal welfare a high priority? Do they believe in and advocate for low stress handling of livestock?
- **Opportunity** - working conditions, attitudes and actions of coworkers, organizational policies and rules. Are facilities and supporting tools (horses, dogs, vehicles, etc.) suitable for low stress handling? Does ownership/management support/expect low stress handling? Do coworkers support and practice low stress handling?

Conclusion

Effective implementation of low stress handling will not occur unless it is understood, endorsed and expected by ownership/management. Subsequently, all handlers in an organization must embrace and practice low stress handling - if not livestock will be confused and all handlers will be frustrated.

Consumer expectation is evident – they anticipate those responsible for managing animals will demonstrate integrity, exercise best management practices and promote animal welfare.

Literature Cited

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