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Thinking Versus Reacting

As promised last week, I'd like to dive into a bit deeper the message that Curt Pate provided on stockmanship and animal handling. I'll be upfront that these are my summary notes of talking points and all the credit goes to the Mr. Pate on his ideas and presentation information. I'll apologize in advance to Mr. Pate if I grossly misrepresented his concepts. To learn more, visit: curtpatestockmanship.com He is one of many who advocate for low stress animal handling.

The animal handling demonstration on a nice set of Red Angus bred heifers, went a bit rough, but was very much a teachable moment. These heifers were conditioned to a feed truck and being called in with a feed bucket as "bait". Applying pressure and trying to drive them proved a learning lesson. Mr. Pate described this as having cattle that are used to being "pulled" versus "pushed". He pointed out that neither is right or wrong, but that livestock should be able to be handled by both methods and that his preference is to create animal movement by "pushing" and creating a chain effect to pull the remainder of the herd along behind.

Two important concepts in animal handling are point of balance and flight zone. The point of balance is the place on an animal (usually near the shoulder) where they respond to pressure and create movement. Pressure behind this point creates forward movement, pressure ahead of it creates movement backwards. Direct pressure at the point, can create sideways movement. Flight zone is the "comfort bubble" around an animal where they respond to external pressure. Pressure can come in the form of sight, sound and physical proximity to the animal.

When handling livestock in a "pushing" approach, this can be accomplished via horseback, on foot or with ATVs or other motorized vehicles. ATVs are generally the least responsive to applying specific pressure within the flight zone/point of balance, to create precision movement. As a horseman, he believes the most effective way to create precision movement is horseback. Much like the push/pull concept, his advice was to have cattle conditioned to multiple handling methods. By the end of the demonstration, the cattle were responding positively to the ATV pressure, so you can teach a cow!

Another point he made is that "more is less" many times when it comes to helpers handling livestock. Livestock are prey animals and can see handlers as predators. They want to focus eye contact on one point of pressure and multiple people, giving multiple signals can often only cause confusion and work against low stress movement. Having animals turn their bodies to look at you, like often happens when you push/drive from behind, is counterproductive to forward movement. One reason Mr. Pate advocates working animals from the side at more perpendicular angles within their line of sight. Another good nugget was "the fastest way to work livestock is SLOW". Take your time and keep your cool!

All of this was summarized and visualized very well by Mr. Pate, as he explained that there are two sides to the brain. One is the resting/thinking/content side and one is the moving/reacting/scared side. Animals who are thinking are comfortable and at ease. When functioning in this side of the brain, they are eating, growing and producing. This is where we want animals all the time, including at handling events. Reacting animals are stressed, scared, not gaining or producing. The longer an animal functions in the reacting side, the less content and less profitable they become to the operation. The goal is to keep the animals thinking!

Anyone who truly wants to become a better stockman should seek out the wisdom of Curt Pate and other low stress animal handlers. Having worked with many types of operations and handling techniques, I believe first hand in the benefits Mr. Pate shared and encourage everyone to keep your livestock thinking versus reacting.