

# Observation is the Key to Being a “Cow Whisperer”



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Observing the behavior and, more importantly, changes in behavior of an animal or group of animals is one of the components necessary when working with animals. All of us quickly recognize that a dog with its hair standing up along its back and a non-wagging tail is not in a “friendly mood” and one best back away from the situation. When it comes to dairy cattle, this observational skill is important in the day-to-day management of cattle, especially when we wish to move them in the direction intended. Also, understanding how dairy cows react to novel situations and more importantly, what constitutes a novel situation to them is important as we manage their movement to and from the daily activities associated with milking and general management practices.

One of the pioneers in bringing this skillset to the forefront is Dr. Temple Grandlin. She was one of the earlier animal welfare or behavioral scientists. She has spent her career observing animals and using these observations to design better handling facilities and improve the skill sets of those working directly with cattle. She is best known for her work in designing handling facilities in harvest plants, but her observations related to cattle behavior also apply to managing dairy cows and heifers on farm. Recently, she discussed some key areas to remember when working with dairy cattle.

## **First experiences must be positive**

When cattle are exposed to new people, equipment, or situations, the experience needs to be positive. Negative experiences are remembered by cattle for their lifetimes. A positive experience the first time loading heifers on a trailer will help increase the likelihood they will enter more easily in the future. This goes along with the concept that a heifer’s first experience entering the milking parlor or milking barn must be positive. The best approach is to let cattle voluntarily check out the situation versus being suddenly introduced. Remember that it takes 20 to 30 minutes for a cow to calm down after it has been frightened.

## **Cattle have good memories!**

Cattle remember their experiences, both good or bad. They remember people that mistreated them as well as situations they find fearful. Their memories are very specific to a particular situation or object and often does not transfer to other experiences. For example, a particular truck may be associated with grain feeding time for a group of heifers, but a new individual getting out of the truck is a novel experience to them. Also, the more “new” experiences an animal has, the quicker they get accustomed to change.

## **Some cows are more outgoing than others**

In general, dairy cows do have a smaller flight zone (area around them they allow humans to enter without moving away). This is a direct result of their daily contact with humans at an early age, genetics, and reflects the quality of contact with humans. Some cows are just more timid and fearful than others and one needs to recognize this trait in these animals when working with them.

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## **Cattle see and react to small changes**

Small changes in their environment can make cattle fearful and reluctant to enter or move past the object. When cattle are reluctant to enter, look for the small changes in their environment and correct them. For example, a small piece of plastic or other object out of place can make cattle leery to enter a holding pen, milking parlor, barn, or eat at the feedbunk. Cattle do not like shadows, which can change with season and time of day.

## **Cattle like sure footing**

Cattle are fearful of areas that are slippery. We work really hard at providing non-slip surfaces in barns and holding pens. These areas are often grooved or are dry and covered with a non-slip type material. One area we may forget about is the area for restraint of cattle during breeding and other management practices. Coming out of chutes and palpation rails as well as entrances into barns should provide non-slip surfaces as cattle enter and exit these areas.

## **Cattle walk slowly with their head down**

Cattle walk at approximately 2 miles of hour with their heads down so they can see where they are going. In contrast, humans walk at around 3 to 4 miles per hour or twice as fast. Sometimes cleaning stalls or resetting the electric fence for the next grazing period will allow cattle to move to the barn or holding pen at their own speed versus a more hurried pace which can result in slipping and injury. Stressed cows also take longer to milk.

By taking a few minutes to review these simple, but important concepts, with your employees and family members can pay dividends with increased milk production. Also, content cows help create a more pleasant work environment for all that are working with these cattle. One needs to remember that being a cow whisperer starts at a very early age of cattle. Behaviors and experiences are remembered for their lifetime.