Your cows do not talk but they can be communicating some very important messages. Are you listening? The way cows behave can tell us a lot about how they are handled, how comfortable their facilities are, and if management is causing or reducing stress. It’s easy to write off a cow’s opinion since college-trained people have scientifically taken care of all her nutritional and housing needs. Cow handling skills are not considered because the cow is confined in a barn and we can make her go where we want. Here are some reasons why we need to pay attention to our cows’ behavior.

Why Listen?

The public expects us to take good care of our animals. In 2006, the Arizona public voted by 61% to prohibit veal crates for calves and gestation crates for breeding pigs (1). Ben and Jerry’s announced that they would only buy their eggs from producers who use certified–humane cage free methods (2). Would your farm qualify if milk companies decided that they would only purchase milk from “certified–humane” dairy farms? Lameness is just one example of a health issue that seems to have gotten worse (3).

The most important reason to listen to your cows is the potential for increased profit. Happy cows do make more money. I will cite studies that demonstrate that good handling, facilities, and management can make a difference. It is important to remember that just because a cow gives a lot of milk does not mean that she is comfortable and healthy. Cows have their own “culture” and see or perceive the world differently than people do. To “listen” to cattle, we need to appreciate why what looks like a “dumb stunt” to us is perfectly natural to a cow.

The Cow’s World

How does a cow see her world? She sees a lot more because her eyes are on the side of her head so she can see everything except what’s directly behind her. But with poor depth perception, she doesn’t see her world as well as we do. In addition, she lacks the vertical vision we have and really can’t see where to put her feet unless she puts her head down. This is why cows always “jump” over the gutter. Cattle can hear better than people in both volume and range and really don’t appreciate our hollering. In fact, a person hollering is as stressful as getting hit with a hot-shot (4). Cattle also are prey animals and feel safe in a group, will circle or put
their head in a corner when threatened, and prefer to follow one another. Cattle are creatures of habit and it takes them a while to sort out anything new. One more important point, cows have their own social order and when moving animals, frequently the subordinate cattle will be last. Sounds reasonable, but how many times do we try to make the little heifer push the boss cow in front of her. We end up with the heifer running over us to get away. I am sure she is thinking how can people be so dumb to ask her to push the boss cow. It’s much easier to push the 200 pound person!

The Benefits

Do good cow handling skills pay? Seabrook (5) found that when cows were handled aversively, in a way stressful to the cows, milk yield was reduced 1460 lb per year, cows took twice as long to enter the parlor, and defecated six times more often. Breuer and co-workers (6) found that heifers that were hit or rushed into a parlor produced 3 lb less milk per day, lost 30 lb more weight, and experienced more lameness than cows treated more calmly. Jan Shearer, a bovine foot specialist, believes that when cows are rushed to the holding area they suffer more lameness (7). Hemsworth (8) found that the percentage of cows approaching within 10 feet of an unfamiliar person was correlated positively with conception rate to first service. Think back to farms you have visited, some cows came right up to you and tried to eat your shirt and at other farms, the cows scattered like birds. What does that tell you about how they have been handled?

There are three kinds of people, a few are natural born cattle people, some people are not cattle people and should not work around cattle, and most of us are people who can learn to be good cattle people. Do you provide training for your staff so they can learn to handle cattle and be “good” cattle people?

Facilities and Management

Facilities and management also can play an important role in keeping the cow comfortable and productive. In work done with pre-fresh/early lactation first-calf heifers, milk production was 6.5 lb per day greater in the first 80 days when stocked at 80% capacity versus 120% of capacity (9). Lameness was 24% versus 11% in one survey when the stall surface was mattress versus sand. Interestingly, lame cows on mattresses spend more time standing in the freestalls. They spent 2 hours standing if on sand; 4 hours if moderately lame on mattresses, and 6 hours standing if on mattresses and severely lame (10). Researchers speculated that fear of slipping or difficulty in rising is what extended the standing times on mattresses. Lying time is very important since there is a 20% to 50% increase in udder blood flow in lying cows and 400 to 500 lbs of blood must flow through the udder for each 1 lb of milk produced. A simple management consideration like stall maintenance is important as demonstrated by a study that documented 10 minutes less lying time for each centimeter less of bedding depth (11). It has shown that regrouping cows can increase cow-interaction before a stable hierarchy is achieved, and this can reduce milk production 2 to 5% for a short period of time. A newly regrouped cow will be involved in 10 interactions per hour immediately after a move, twice as many as other cows in the group (10).

While it may sound obvious, comfortable cows are healthier and more productive. When you have a lot of “dumb” cows that want to lie in the alley, it may be time to measure the size and review the management of your freestalls. If your cows walk slowly and frequently fall down, maybe your floors need re-grooving. Don’t get in your cows’ way by overstocking or having them spend too much time in lockups or holding pens, and make sure feed is easy to reach. Yes, the cow can reach a long way with her tongue but she also could have her fill of feed and be resting, ruminating, and making milk in a free-stall instead of stretching for one more little bite.

Summary

Understanding cow behavior can be good for cows and good for people and it doesn’t cost very much in time or money. But, it does take a deliberate effort to make sure you and your staff are practicing good cow handling and your facilities are as comfortable as possible. Train your staff in good cow handling; don’t tolerate abusive behavior and reward those who are good with cattle. Good people can compensate for poor facilities but good facilities can never compensate for bad behavior by people. Review your facilities for weak links because good facilities will allow your staff and cows to do their best job possible for you. There are no free lunches but learning to listen to your cows comes pretty close.

References


5. Seabrook, M. F. 1984. The psychological interaction between the stockman and his animals and its influence on performance of pigs and dairy cows. The Veterinary Rec. 115: 84-87


