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A local farmer recently suffered severe injuries inflicted by cattle he was trying to load. These were his own animals raised from birth and slated for transport to their new owner. We begin with this attention getter to lead readers through what built up to this event and to discuss alternatives that may prevent such injury to others.

First, most mistakes cattle make are the handler's fault. We put them in positions resulting in bad behavior and then blame them for being "high headed", a term used to describe cattle as having bad temperament. The truth is, they can all be high headed if pressured hard enough. Knowing when to stop pressure is an art, but you must pay attention – most are not. To pressure is to get close, to make sound or movement asking cattle to go in a desired direction and it can take place out on pasture or in confined spaces of a pen. Flight zone is a term used to describe how close you can get before the animals start moving away from you or turn around to face you, an act of defense by prey animals if you are inside this zone.

Cattle handlers, use many methods to "ask" their animals to cooperate. They entice with feed, they call them, they drive them with horses, trucks or 4 wheelers, just not too fast if aware. Big cattle drives have someone in front leading to set the pace, sometimes along each side and someone in back, the drag position. Cowboys and girls can tell you more about how this works but a cattle drive can also be carried out in other ways.

The late Bud Williams, a renowned "cattle whisperer" successfully conducted a drive of rain deer by himself, replacing a crew of machines and people needed to accomplish the same. He knew of communication going on with the animals and recognized their response to his actions. The trick is learning to read this response. Bud was good at this and many of us are still learning how. A favorite technique he used was pressure and release. Move up close and when the cattle move in the right direction, you release the pressure by stopping. This tells them they did the right thing; the communication is silent.

Back to the local tragedy. Leading up to this loading event, the cattle were being processed according to an agreed upon sales arrangement. Final vaccines administered, blood drawn for disease testing and clearance prepared for interstate shipment. There were a number of cattle being readied for shipment and processing needed to take place at the "speed of commerce". Many feel waiting for cooperation by the cattle is not an option at this stage.

In livestock markets the speed of commerce is on full display. Many animals must be caught, loaded and hauled in from surrounding farms, unloaded and moved into and through the market facilities. This includes submitting to standing on a scale so an accurate weight is found, being identified by paint or paper tag and then moved into pens for holding until the auction starts. All of this within a limited time, usually less than 24 hours. Speed rules here and the animals must reach the auction ring on time and so the handlers urge the cattle forward using a variety of pressures.

The injured farmer had agreed to a shipment deadline, a satisfactory health status and so commerce was shifted in gear, just not high gear, yet. During processing there is not much waiting around for volunteers to step up to the “squeeze chute” a metal contraption used to catch and hold the cattle still for the intended processes to take place. As metal on metal makes noise, this is not a silent operation and the loud voices of handlers also pressure the cattle forward, working sticks direct and encourage forward movement when needed, and as a last resort, an electric prod for those refusing to move at all. Remember commerce has begun, it is in gear and the deadline for shipment has been set.

Livestock Behavior Specialist, Dr Temple Grandin, Colorado State at Fort Collins said, “an electric prod is ok, just put it down once it is used”. And as for working sticks associated with processing cattle, a local “cattle whisperer” eliminated them on his farm. These 6-foot fiberglass poles are used to increase the handlers reach when needed and to avoid close contact. But he knew that once a working stick was picked up it would not be put down so eliminated them.

The cattle that injured their owner were “jacked up” by the pre-shipment processing and they were in a confined space without enough options for escape by the cattle or handlers, placing both in close contact. But, had the cattle been in close contact with their owner before? Yes, they had, but this time processing at the speed of commerce was a new experience and could have triggered their reaction, priming them for a fight, looking for danger in the people around them and they found it.

What could have been done differently? The pen could have been larger, better equipped but often on rented land we do the least to accomplish the job and this was the case. Could the processing have been done differently? Being quiet, using low voices or none at all, seeing bad behavior handlers change theirs, allowing time for cattle to take their next step, preventing loud metallic noise, put down the working stick when not needed, take a break when things are ramping up like the Australians do.

Jennifer Ligon, County Agent in Buckingham County knows these many low stress cattle handling techniques and she wrote about these in her thesis entitled: Low stress cattle handling effects at weaning: weight and activity. She knows that slow is fast when working cattle and can prove it with a stop watch used to compare her methods with the traditional.