

It's about human-cattle interactions

by Lana Kaiser, D.V.M.

A LITTLE over a year ago, Karen Bohnert reflected upon the impact that a cow named Elvira had on her oldest son (in the January 25, 2016, *Hoard's Dairyman*, on page 61). Elvira, her son's beloved cow, show cow, favorite cow and long-time companion, was on the cull list.

"My heart broke for Tyler, but in all honesty, I feel blessed for all the life lessons Elvira taught my oldest son. The duo grew up together, matured together, and it has been so rewarding watching them develop," Karen wrote.

Tyler and Elvira's relationship is a classic example of positive human-animal interaction — both parties benefited.

Researchers in the United Kingdom studied the stockperson's perceptions of the human-animal relationships on dairy farms. Most believed that cows "had feelings," were intelligent and that human behavior impacts how cattle react. The scientists noted that milk yield on farms where cows were called by name was higher than on those farms where this was not the case. The authors attributed this to both positive human attitude and human-animal interaction.

It's about attitudes

Sometime later, a blogger put his own headline spin on this study, "Cows with names yield more milk." To the uninitiated, it appeared that we could improve the milk supply by simply naming cows. Although the headline was about cows with names, the study, and many others, is really about the influence of our attitudes, husbandry, and stockmanship on human-bovine interactions.

Be it anxiety, anger, excitement, or calmness, people who show horses or dogs have understood for a long time that feelings travel right down the reins or leash and influence the animal's performance. Human-livestock interactions and understanding the relationships between the stockperson, productivity, and animal welfare is a relatively new field of scientific study with origins

in Australia. We now understand that the stockperson's attitudes and behavior can influence the animals in their care, in both a positive and negative way.

We don't often think about the role the stockperson might play on productivity and animal welfare. Likely, we think less about how positive human-livestock interactions might also impact the well-being of the stockperson.

It's about interactions

Those of us who work with cows on a daily basis know it isn't the name but the interaction we have with our cows that makes the difference. But naming cows results in a "relationship" between the human and the cow that may indeed be positive for both the human and the cow.

It may be a close relationship, like Tyler and Elvira, or it may be the relationship of many humans and hundreds of cows. Whatever the scenario, when humans and animals co-exist together, there is a relationship — and it can be positive or negative.

The tone of the relationship depends heavily on the attitude of the humans (toward cows specifically and life in general). People who are satisfied with their work and valued by their employer are likely to have a more positive attitude that can positively impact the well-being of our cows. Calmly moving cows to the parlor improves milk let-down and impacts milk production. Calm handling of calves early in life improves their socialization and reduces their fear of humans. Treating cows "nicely" with respect and kindness pays dividends for both humans and cows, in both production and welfare.

Behavior is learned

Australian researchers believe that a small percentage of people are naturally gifted animal handlers and caretakers; an equally small percentage should not be involved in animal care. This means that the vast majority of people need



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to be taught how to care for cattle.

Cows respond to kindness and calm handling but find yelling as aversive as the electric pulse from a hot shot. While cows exposed to loud noises do adapt to some degree over time, cows that have had an aversive or negative experience with a person or event are more likely to avoid that person or circumstance. Similarly, cows are more likely to approach a person or situation that previously resulted in a positive interaction. Of course, cows recognize that people have certain super powers (for example, the "halter spell" for immobilization and the ability to make feed appear), but they recognize that our intent is benign as long as they behave themselves.

Most of us have witnessed a frustrated hot-headed human yelling at a cow that was not "following the human's plan" and the cow (being quite sensible) moving away from the yelling, ranting human. It is generally the case that, when cows are not going where we want them to go, the human, not the cow, is the problem.

It is usually quickly apparent, when first you enter a herd of cows, the nature of the human-bovine interaction. Herds of cows have individual cultures, just like human societies, though simpler, of course.

Entering a new herd can be a little like visiting a foreign country. If you are perceptive, you can quickly see whether natural inquisitiveness of the natives has been replaced by fear of humans. In the best herds, a person walking among the cows feels accepted, and the cows treat people like "us" rather than "them." Naming cows, at least some of them, feels natural in a herd like this because the people observe the cows closely enough to see and appreciate their individual characters. 🐄

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