

The Art of Firm Kindness

Our topics for this week are:

- Handler affection for animals
- Proper handler attitude
- The power of patience
- The use of voice, touch, and body language

Formal guidelines for handling animals do not exist, but there are official guidelines on the physical restraint of animals, that is the American Veterinary Medical Association's position statement on the Physical Restraint of Animals.

In summary, it says animal restraint should include:

- The least restraint required to allow the procedure(s) to be performed properly
- Protection of both the animal and personnel from harm
- To plan, formulate, and communicate restraint prior to its application
- The use chemical restraint when physical restraint presents excessive risk of injury

Proper animal handling for husbandry, treatment, and safety is quiet, methodical, and should leave the animal easier to handle the next time. In addition to achieving the initial purpose for handling animals, each handling event should have three goals:

1. safety for the animal and the handler,
2. minimum stress for the animal and the handler during animal capture and restraint, and
3. a calm release of the animal at time of the handler's choosing.

Safety is paramount and supercedes minimizing stress or a desirable release, when necessary. Handler safety is of higher priority than animal safety, but all possible effort should be to ensure the safety of both.

An effective animal handler has a proper attitude which includes allotment of sufficient time; use of his or her voice, touch, and body language appropriately; constant guarding against the risk of human or animal injury; adaptation to special circumstances, and proper attire and grooming to reduce the risk of injury. A common question that an effective animal handler asks himself is: Would going slower make things happen faster?

The traits of superior animal handlers have been found to be emotional stability and being assertive, serious, pragmatic, forthright, self-assured, sensitive, and conscientious. Better handlers are more reserved than outgoing, suspicious than trusting, and controlled than uncontrolled in their responses to animal actions. Lack of empathy is the hallmark of a poor animal handler. Handlers may be empathetic toward one species and effective with that species

but dislike other species and be ineffective with them. Use of derogatory terms toward animals such as “dumb”, “stupid”, “mean”, etc. affect handler attitude and actions and should disqualify that person from handling the animals to whom the terms were directed.

Affection for the Animals

A good animal handler has to like the type of animal that will be handled. When a handler dislikes a type of animal to be handled, the handler should excuse himself or herself or the supervisor should remove the handler from the situation whenever possible.

In the early 1600s, Rene Descartes, a French mathematician and scientist, advocated a philosophy called Cartesianism. According to Cartesianism, animals have no soul, so they cannot reason and have no feelings and simply react to stimuli like a robot. As such, animals were viewed as dumb creatures to be used like machines. Believers in cartesianism denied the human-animal bond, but good animal handlers always have been able to see the value and benefits of treating animals in their care well. Animal behavior studies that began in the 1950s, have provided evidence that animals are not biological machines and thrive better with empathetic care.

Since the time of Hippocrates, the first rule of medicine has been *primum non nocere* (“first do no harm”). Proper handling techniques should also not cause harm. Some may cause temporary discomfort for distraction reasons such as horse twitches and hog snares, but none should cause physical harm. This includes the use of inappropriate enclosures. Enclosures that can cause mental harm, including stereotypical behavior, e.g., self-mutilation or cannibalism, from intense confinement or the lack of minimal mental stimulation, should not be used.

Positive reinforcement (clicker training, food rewards) can be appropriate for companion animals that are predators. Using food rewards, petting, scratching, grooming, or verbal praises are beneficial under the correct circumstances. However, larger prey animals can endanger people if they invade human personal space. With these animals, negative reinforcement is important. Food treats should only be offered to horses and livestock in pans or buckets. They should not be taught to associate hands or pockets as a source of food. Established respect of human personal space and trust of protection by a handler is far more likely to keep a frightened horse from running over the handler than expecting a food reward or petting it while it is frightened.

Proper Attitude

Extroverted behavior, i.e., direct stares, exaggerated facial expressions, frequent hand and arm movements, and loud or spiking speech patterns, can attract the attention of humans and may engender a good first impression, but these mannerisms do not gain or maintain trust from animals. However, quiet demeanor does not mean being submissive. An effective animal handler is gentle and calm but assertive enough to remain socially dominant over the animal being handled. Animal handlers should move and act calmly, deliberately, and patiently. The best animal handlers are confident, empathetic introverts. The most effective veterinarians and other servants of the animal-owning public are ambiverts, people who are able to have some extrovert tendencies around humans but a confident, empathetic introvert around animals.

Being organized and having a plan before handling or restraining animals is important for

success for each handling event and all future handling events with the animals handled. Determination is an essential quality of a good handler.

A handler must be confident and determined that the plan to handle or restrain an animal will be successful. Allowing the animal to escape the first attempt at handling will make subsequent efforts at least twice as difficult. The release must be as quiet and calm as possible and it must be under control of the handler, not the animal.

Animals resent or fear forced restraint. Excessive restraint can cause increased aggression toward handlers. Regardless of the species being handled, the least restraint possible (without risking animal escape) should be attempted. If restraint will be used, it should be as humane as possible to still ensure reasonable safety to humans and animals.

Allocation of Sufficient Time: Power of Patience

Sufficient time to observe the animal or animals to be handled is important in determining the best approach to handling and to allow the animal or animals to adapt to handler presence. Once a plan of handling is determined, sufficient time must be allocated to perform the handling with minimum stress to the handler and the animals. Plans and decisions made in haste or executed hastily are always temptations when a handler is pressed for time because of other responsibilities or is concerned about the expense of spending longer than the minimum feasible time. In the long run, trying to rush proper handling leads to increased risk of injuries or excessive procedure time because of animals being stressed and scared. Longer times need to be allocated particularly for handling young or new animals. The luxury of adequate time is always subject to weather conditions.

An excellent example of the power of patience and working with animals is the Texas cattle drives that took place for 20 years following the American Civil War from 1866 to 1886. These so-called drives, which were actually herding, consisted of 10 to 15 men moving 2,000 to 3,000 wild cattle over 200 to 1,000 miles of open country without the cattle losing weight. This was possible, in large part, by the patience required to herd the cattle and doing so as a slow, quiet trek. Cattle handlers, called drovers, spent 10 to 12 hours riding horseback, herding the cattle primarily with quiet finesse, communicating by hand signals, to move the herd 10 to 12 miles per day for 25 days to 100 days to railheads in Kansas. Texas cattle drives to California took five to six months.

Use of Voice, Touch, and Body Language

Restraint begins with the handler's voice or body language. Animals like to hear a handler's voice, if it is soothing and has rhythmic tones. Soothing talk is not characteristic of a predator or a challenge for social dominance. Voice can be used to direct an animal's movement, gain its attention, or reprimand its misbehavior. An instructional voice has a lower pitch and is slightly louder than a soothing voice. A commanding or reprimanding voice is deeper and with conviction, but shouting, screaming, or high-pitched sounds should be avoided in all cases.

A handler's body language needs to be coordinated with the voice characteristics or the animal will become confused.

Non-threatening body language includes keeping the arms down and close to the body with palms toward the thighs. Raising the arms is threatening, but can be used to drive animals in a

desired direction. An erect posture is less threatening than slumped shoulders or rounded back which simulates a pouncing and threatening posture. A glancing gaze or indirect stare is less threatening than a direct stare. Staring particularly at an animal's eyes is threatening to prey animals and social dominance-challenging to carnivores. Moderately rapid, rhythmic normal movements are less threatening than rapid, jerky, or slow, creeping actions.

Touch can readily convey handler confidence and intentions to an animal being handled. Excessively light touch or stroking does this poorly causing signs of apprehension in most animals. Moderately firm, deliberate gentle touch conveys more confidence and is less threatening than very light touch or stroking. Touching should be done with fingers together and applied with either the palm side or the back of the hand. Touching with the tips of the fingers while the fingers are spread or with the end of the thumb is less well tolerated. This type of touch is more likely to cause the animal to move the touched area away. Using spread finger tips or the end of the thumb can be a much more useful means of moving a horse in a desired direction than pushing with a flat hand. Very firm, pushy, or slapping-type touches may be perceived as a challenge to social position in the herd or pack or a reprimand for misbehavior. However, it can be beneficial for handlers to desensitize horses to moderate slaps to prevent flight reactions if tack or clothing accidentally slaps them while mounting or riding or if the handler or rider needs to slap a biting fly, especially horseflies.

The shoulders are not densely innervated by touch receptors and this is not a location that fatal injuries can be inflicted. As a result, animals tolerate touch on the shoulders more easily than touch around the more vulnerable areas such as the eyes, ears, throat, belly, or legs.

Animals use body language to a greater extent than any other means of communication. For example, dogs "play bow" to signal desire to play through body language. A play face is one with an open mouth and erect ears. The dog will bark while advancing and retreating with bouncing movements.

Some animals are especially sensitive to human facial expressions and other body language. An Orlov Trotter horse in Germany, named Clever Hans, was famous for this in the early 1900s. He appeared able to perform arithmetic and other mental tasks by reading subtle human body language. In recognition of his abilities, the observer-effect is also referred to as the Clever Hans effect. In the 1930s, a Lewellin setter in Missouri, Jim the Wonder Dog, was capable of similar feats. The Clever Hans effect may be what enables some animals to detect early signs of hypoglycemia in diabetics and impending seizures in epileptic humans.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

1. Ultimately, it is dangerous to offer food rewards by hand to horses and livestock.
2. Each handling, and especially restraint experience, is a lesson learned by the animal, and their release is most remembered.
3. Animals can detect human body language that is imperceptible to humans.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available online at <https://www.betteranimalhandling.com>

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.