

LOW STRESS LIVESTOCK HANDLING

An Introduction part 1

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Low-stress livestock handling (LSLH) has become a familiar phrase. The term LSLH is used in discussions about working livestock, handling facilities, and is even used to advertise livestock equipment. What is your definition of low stress livestock handling?

Do you equate low stress with slow moving stock? If we do, then how do we explain animals running and bucking across the pasture on cool days? Is that running because of stress?

Do we really know what low stress livestock handling is, or do we simply see it as a good thing, but have no specific definition in mind?

If you are like me, you have a broad overall picture of low-stress livestock handling, but you have never really investigated the intricate details to look below the surface, seeing the nitty-gritty. You probably picture animals ambling along while people quietly walk behind them as low stress handling.

What if people are on ATVs? Is that low stress? This series of articles will describe the complexities of low stress livestock handling, what it is, what it is not, and explain how to incorporate the LSLH principles into your operation to benefit of your livestock and you operation, and yourself.

The term low stress livestock handling (LSLH) was first used by Allan Nation to describe the unique method Bud Williams used to move livestock. In the original sense, LSLH refers to what Bud learned about livestock and his techniques that followed.

In a nutshell **LSLH enables us to learn the best ways to communicate and work with stock so that your idea becomes their idea.**

Whit Hibbard, a student of Bud Williams, defines LSLH “as a livestock centered, behaviorally-correct, psychologically-oriented, ethical and humane method of working livestock based on **mutual communication and understanding.**”

Have you ever worked livestock thinking – ‘what are the livestock trying to tell me?’ If you listen, they will teach you how to communicate with them and become good stockmen.

Stockmanship VS LSLH

Some would say stockmanship and LSLH are one in the same. Hibbard believes LSLH is the most essential part of stockmanship, but they are Not the same.

Stockmanship is the knowledgeable and skillful handling of livestock in a safe, efficient, effective and low stress manner. He believes stockmanship can contain natural horsemanship, ranch roping, dog handling, facility design along with LSLH. The knowledge and understanding of LSLH is needed to be a true stockman because LSLH influences all the aspects of stockmanship.

Good handling practices result in good animal performance; it’s a scientific fact. Weight gain increases when animals are less stressed, conception rates are higher, milk production is increased, and carcass quality is improved. Beyond that, less stress means healthier animals and a more efficient immune system.

Adding to those advantages, LSLH is more efficient, enabling more animals to be handled in less time by less staff with increased safety. Keep in mind these benefits are achievable with no additional input. It only takes us learning and practicing a new skill. It takes us changing our thinking and behavior. If I would tell you that learning a new skill will directly increase profits while making work more enjoyable - you would be all in. Well, that is what Bud Williams and many others believe about LSLH.



Five Layers of LSLH

Williams believed there are 5 fundamental layers of LSLH, all built on one another. At the base is Mindset, then Attitude, Reading Animals, Working Animals, and Preparing Animals.

1. CORRECT MINDSET

Learning Mindset

Williams believed, **knowing WHY we do something is more important than knowing How to do it or What to do.**

A **Learning Mindset** is needed for LSLH. First, we have to quit thinking that we already 'know' how to work stock. We have to stop thinking the way we have traditionally worked stock and seen it done is the only way or the best way.

We have to be willing to learn how to work stock better, and to do that, we need to **always ask Why**. Why did the stock do that? Why are they not doing what I want?

I have found this one practice of asking WHY immensely helpful in all my dealings with animals (and people). If we can figure out the Why or come up with possible answers to why, we can figure out how to make things better.

Asking why will lead you to discover answers. Even if you simply have a couple of ideas, you can change things, investigating what works and find possible solutions.

Too many people do things because 'I have always done them this way' continuing on that path without ever questioning. The definition of insanity is doing the same things but expecting different results. We continue to do things that don't always yield good results.

Insanity seems to be limited to the 'other guys', not us. At least that's what we would like to believe. Just maybe there is a better way.

A learning mindset comes first; then we need to accept 100% of the responsibility for the way the stock behave. Excuses and blaming the animals will not help things get better. Watching, learning, looking for *why* things happen so we can change the outcome will enable us to improve next time.

The next step is to focus on working stock properly, not simply getting the job done, but getting it done right. Again, this will happen if we keep asking why.



A meeting of the minds – Lizzy, the Border collie, and the ewes are indeed having a silent conversation.

Open Mindset

In addition to a learning mindset, we may have to change what we believe or have been taught about livestock.

What we believe about livestock determines our subsequent behavior.

Conventional thinking and traditional beliefs of stock, horses, and dogs state that they are uncooperative, unwilling, or unintelligent, therefore they need to be worked physically. This leads us to accept that *Making* animals do what we want by using fear, force, mechanical aids (prods, hotshots, shock collars, whips) is acceptable and normal. It leads us to believe using noise, lots of people, and other mechanical solutions are necessary.

On the other hand, if we believe livestock are smart, sensitive, cooperative, and thoughtful animals that can be easily worked, we approach situations very differently. With this attitude and appropriate techniques to communicate effectively with animals, we are open to learning ways to make our idea their idea. If we are able to Communicate, we don't have to resort to fear and force. Communication makes working livestock easier.

Transitioning from conventional handling to low stress handling requires us to examine our beliefs about livestock and how our beliefs determine our behavior.

Changing beliefs leads to changing behavior – ours and the animals.

2. ATTITUDE

Williams believed “low-stress livestock handling is more than just a technique of working livestock; it's an Attitude about working livestock.

“If you have a good attitude, you can solve almost any problem,” he would say.

A positive attitude includes determination, confidence, decisiveness, and commitment. The combination of all these will lead to positive results. To effectively work livestock, we need to be determined, approaching the animals and each situation with single-minded resolve, according to Williams.

Animals read our body language. Animals can determine if we are confident and know what we are doing.

Ray Hunt, the famous horse trainer, said, “They know when you know, and they know when you don't know.” Anyone that has spent time with animals, from dogs and horses to cattle and sheep, recognizes the truth in this statement.

Williams said, “When you work animals, you have to go in without a timeframe but with determination.” Animals want a confident, decisive person they can trust working them, thus allowing them to relax. Being tentative causes animals to be concerned. Simply a change in your attitude and posture will change the outcome.

As with most things in life that are worth doing, LSLH takes commitment. Changing our mindset and approach to livestock, and animals in general, maintaining a positive attitude and looking for the ways the animals are trying to communicate with us will have far-reaching positive results.

3. UNDERSTANDING HOW ANIMALS COMMUNICATE

Unfortunately for us, animals are not going to speak like they do in the Dr. Doolittle movies. Animals communicate with their movement. Learning how to read that movement allows you to communicate effectively with them.

Williams' method boils down to effective communication between us and our animals. Effective communication means we understand each other. For us, that means paying attention to *how and why* animals move and respond to each other. Then studying how animals respond to us and finally, responding to their movements appropriately.

Williams said, "Every step you take and every step the animal takes you're communicating, so you have to learn to read the animals."

How do you learn to "read animals"? Observation and experimentation, you have to watch and learn. All communication is based on position and where pressure is applied and released.

Movement is Communication

Williams was adamant that *the animals will tell you where to be and what to do by their response to our position*. If we are not getting what we want, we are in the wrong place.

One step can make a huge difference. *Most people want to step forward applying pressure, but rarely do we consider stepping off to the side or, rarer still, stepping back releasing pressure.*

If we are too far in behind stock, they will turn their heads to see us. This lets us know we are making them uncomfortable by being in their blind spot. If we continue to make them uncomfortable, they may slow and turn around looking at us. If we make them really uncomfortable, they may break back wanting to get back where they came from.

When we move out to the side, where they can see us, their head straightens. Straightened heads looking away from us, tell us we are in the correct spot.

When moving stock and they hurry, we are putting too much pressure on them. If they are moving too slow, we may need to be closer or change the angle of our approach. If they will not move into a pen or up an alley, our position is wrong.

If we learn to first look to ourselves when things are not right and try different positions, we may stumble on the correct answer as we figure out where to be.

Most folks work livestock by trying to force them to enter an alley or pen instead of taking the time to read the stock, then figuring out where we need to be and adjusting our position so they walk in of their own will.

Every situation is different, therefore learning to 'read' the stock and adjusting accordingly will always be needed. Williams said, *"We have to work with what we have, not what we think we have, or should have, or want to have. Don't copy what you've done before; rather, read the animals."*



4. WORKING ANIMALS is EASIER WITH COOPERATION

There has been a gradual movement when training horses (and dogs) to a more positive natural method. Groundwork; lounging, sacking out, working in the round pen, has replaced the old techniques of earing down, snubbing up horses, and jumping on.

We have come to understand that laying a framework of trust, respect, and leadership through a graduated series of steps may take a little time, but it pays off. So why don't we apply this same lesson to livestock? Williams advocated working livestock first to establish trust before we attempt to do anything else with them.

The first step is to teach them that we can move them in a controlled manner; speeding up or slowing down, stopping, and turning. Reading what livestock are telling us by their movement

then responding appropriately enables us to have a steering wheel, accelerator, and brake system at our disposal.

We teach them how to behave and respond, so why are we not teaching them to be easily managed?

Instead of just opening a gate and getting new stock out grazing, Williams spent time working them in a controlled space until they were responsive and manageable. As a result, the livestock learn to trust you and look to you for leadership. Williams believed this approach would allow you to do everything with these animals easier, and it would also have a positive impact on their performance.

5. PREPARE for the Future

Whit Hibbard relates how he has changed the way he manages stock since learning Williams' methods. Hibbard says when he would get in cattle to custom graze, he simply opened the gate and drove them where he wanted them to graze. Sometimes this worked, other times it would be a disaster.

Now he works with the cattle in a round pen helping him figure out how they had been worked previously and what they know. He teaches them how to respond to pressure if they don't already know that. This puts in place his steering wheel, brake pedal and accelerator. (We will go into detail in part 2 of this series, learning how our position and movement, ie - pressure and the release of pressure, impact livestock.)

From the pen, he moves them to a larger area, practicing skills he has taught them until they are responsive, manageable, and looking to him for leadership. Hibbard exposes them to things that will be a part of their lives – alleyways, scales, walking through gates. He feels the training time, in the beginning, will pay off in the ease of management later. All this will translate to better feed conversion and even better pasture utilization.



One of Williams' sayings was, "The better you work animals, the better they'll work for you the next time you work them." By reading stock and being in the correct position, enabling them to move calmly from our pressure, we set the stage for all our interactions.

Teaching livestock to move down alleys calmly, before we need them to, will result in things going smoothly when we vaccinate, wean, weight, and load them later; we are laying the ground work for the future. We are teaching them what is expected of them. We are preparing them for the future and making our interactions easier. "Dry runs" teach them there is no reason to be fearful, reducing stress for them and us.

Williams firmly believed we must be open to new ways of thinking and working with animals. We need to approach the work without a timetable allowing us to relax, read the animals and communicate effectively with positioning, movement, pressure, and release of pressure. He was adamant that preparing our livestock and doing our 'ground work' with them would not only pay off with better performance but make our lives more enjoyable.

LSLH is respecting the animals, gaining their trust, and working through their minds, rather than just getting their bodies where we want them.

Learning a new way to do things is not always easy. It still involves commitment, even when it enables increased performance with less people, less time, and less stress.

Understanding the principles behind Why LSLH works helps us commit to the changes in attitude and behavior necessary to learn to communicate effectively using LSLH techniques.

