

# Communication... ALWAYS A FACTOR



R.C. Steward, B.C. Ranch Safety Consultant, Superintendent of Field Operations, AgSafe



**I**t seems that wherever I go at this time of year, any ranch I am asked to visit or which I get a chance to stop in at, communication is a big ol' deal and a topic of conversation. What makes it so fresh on peoples' minds is quickly and clearly indicated to center around the fall movement of cattle. Many times, the comments or discussions are about poor communication, and many times this discussion is initiated by a wife or a child.

Communication is characterized in these discussions as ranging from "yelling, making humiliating, embarrassing and demeaning comments" and icy stone wall silence. Further, all of this is usually reported to be because someone did not go where they should have gone, been where they could have been, or did not do what they ought to have intuitively known the one yelling wanted them to do or not do.

Perhaps you've been there. Perhaps, in all honesty, you would admit that you have been the person yelling or maybe you identify as being on the receiving end of the humiliation. Not fun on either side. Frankly, most would agree that it is a sad fact that what ought to be the pinnacle time of ranch life and cattle management is often among the worst of times. In some situations, the incredible irony is that among the complaints about communication is the frequent and common complaint that there was no communication. In the telling, the common denominator was often stated, "if there was a plan, it was a very poorly communicated one."

Granted, in the reality of any livestock movement circumstances can change and they can change quickly. At times, there is no opportunity to communicate a new direction or plan but other times there is opportunity but no effort is made to regroup and identify the new direction. Good leaders and managers do this all the time; they see the change, react to it, inform others of their roles and as a result achieve

or enable a much smoother outcome. When plans go amuck it is usually with cattle on the fly, heading the wrong way or strung out in such a manner that it makes it impossible to convey a new plan. At this point the calm and professional attitude of the crew is apparent and shows ... or not. This is the time where a positive attitude steps in and makes even a disrupted plan not a big deal. Sometimes it starts with something as simple as assuming the best in each other, after all no one is intentionally trying to make the cows go the wrong way, especially your wife.

So all of this begs the question, can next time be different? Perhaps it can when we simply begin by asking the right questions. Was that a foreseeable event? Possibly. Had the cattle reacted the same way at the same place last year? Probably. Could it have been discussed in a short meeting when the plan was laid out? Potentially. At least it is worth thinking about the what if's and coming up with some discussion.

While poor or non-existent communication can have some obvious detrimental and even devastating effects on relationships, both within the family and staff, there are safety issues at stake as well. Poor communication often results in increased levels of stress. Stress is a real and medically identified issue that has been shown to affect health and is often found to be a contributing factor in injuries and incidents that occur at work. Among other indicators, stress can manifest itself

through poor decision making, reduced job performance, lack of effort and attention, reduced longevity at a workplace (including succession) and a lack of try or enthusiasm. Therefore, it ought to be addressed. Furthermore, one of the biggest concerns in the industry is the procurement and retention of workers and there are concerns around ranch succession and the lack of desire by family members to carry on the ranch.

I have the privilege of conducting low stress cattle handling seminars around the country and get to work with producers from many provinces and states. In that capacity, I have seen some incredible examples of just how great a family or crew can work together. They are loving what they do and, as I often say to my riding partner in the rain chasing cows through blow down, "living the dream!" There have been innovative and significant advancements in the whole concept of low stress cattle handling but we can't ever forget that this should extend to those we live and work with as well.

**Communicating a plan involves a few basic points including such things as:**

1. Have one, you can't communicate a plan when you don't actually have one.
2. Engage the experience of others in the development of the plan, communication involves listening.
3. Listen to the plan as laid out and do your part, pay attention, let the leader lead.
4. Take your time, usually the lack of



communication occurs when there is a rush to get the job done. Slow is fast. While the cattle settle down, which takes 20-30 minutes when stressed, so can you. Use the time when they mother up and settle down to think through and communicate the next stages of your task.

5. Consider what could go wrong with the plan you have made and discuss how you will react to that should it occur.
6. Debrief after the task. What went well? What would work better? Were we in the right place or could we have been better positioned? Could the gates have been set differently? Are there things we can change in the physical facility or will we just struggle through the same difficult layout again next year?

You are the expert in devising and carrying out the best plan for you and your outfit. You are the expert in considering facility design and making some cost effective changes that ease the whole process - making cattle movement easier, improving both flow and handler safety.

There is an old saying, "if you don't know where you are going, any train will get you there." Take an honest look at how you are doing. Do you have a plan? Do you communicate it effectively? Is there room for improvement? ... ask your wife.

I ride with great people on a pretty tough piece of ground from May to November, there are lots of ways that things can go wrong.

Can you plan for every event or possible outcome? No of course not, but usually when things go off the rails it is not because a well thought out and properly communicated plan failed, it is more often the case that there was no plan to start with. There wasn't one that went south because there was never one on the nap.

Have a great Christmas with the very best and real meaning of the season finding you well, warm and blessed. FARSHA/AgSafe is available to assist with any safety related matters please give us a call at any time.

*Reg Steward, AgSafe Provincial  
Ranch Safety Consultant  
Superintendent of Field Operations  
Cariboo-Chilcotin Regional Consultant  
T: 1-877-533-1789 • reg@agsafebc.ca*

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