



Bud Williams (center), Bowie, Texas, explains that one of the central problems when working cattle is a lack of communication. "My method of working livestock consists of learning to 'read' what the animal is telling you," he says. [PHOTOS COURTESY OF TINA WILLIAMS]



Pressuring from directly behind an animal makes it nervous and causes it to turn around to see the cause of pressure, Williams says. Instead, he moves back and forth to avoid overpressuring individual animals.

# Under Pressure

*With patience, low-stress handling can save you time and trouble.*

Story by  
**BROOKE BYRD**

No matter how calm your cattle are, stress is a factor in nearly all livestock operations. Stress is often the biggest cost to producers and feeders, says Roger Ingram, University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisor.

"Stress can affect animals in many different ways," he says,

including a reduction in drinking and eating. Because of this, stress directly affects a producer's pocketbook. "If you have 100 head and your average daily gain (ADG) is 3.5 pounds, the gain per day per pen would be 350 pounds," Ingram notes. An animal that doesn't gain doesn't make money.

Other problems, Ingram explains, are the health costs. "If the animal isn't eating or drinking, then

the chances of it getting sick are much higher." Treatment costs are among producers' biggest expenses.

Stress also costs the people who work livestock, says Bud Williams, Bowie, Texas, who teaches livestock handling workshops around the country. "Most people, when they're working livestock, get very upset and frustrated," he notes.

Throughout a lifetime of working with all kinds of livestock, Williams has developed a set of principles and methods to help combat stress in livestock production.

"I don't want any animal I work with to perceive me as a predator," he says.

## Pressure and release

Williams' way of handling cattle revolves around movement.

"Our body language is how the animal reads what we want," he says. The central principle involves pressuring the animal to cause a reaction and releasing that pressure, while working around an animal's flight zone (see Fig. 1).

He defines "pressure" as anything that causes a reaction in an animal. Williams mostly pressures an animal with movement, but notes that noise or nearby objects could also apply pressure. However, he warns, loud or continuous noise can put too much pressure on animals.

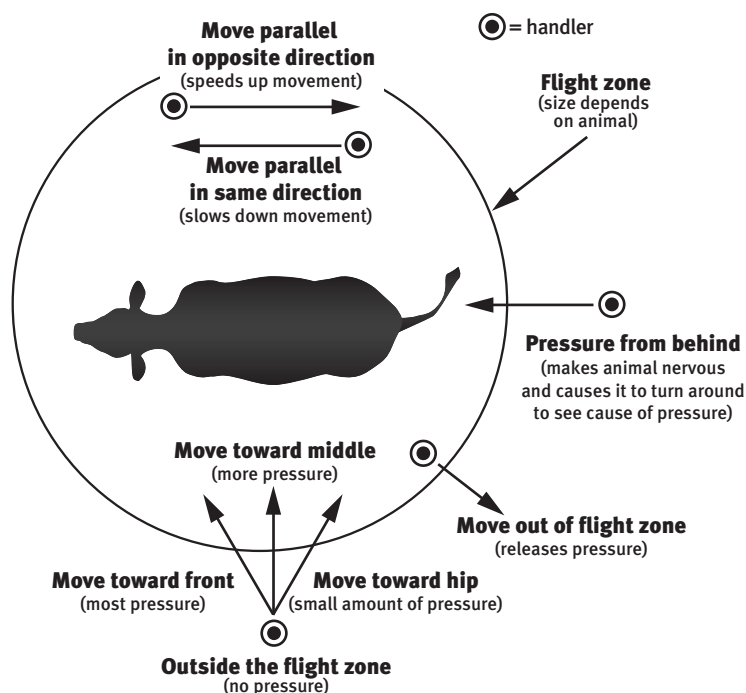
The flight zone is the area around an animal that, if moved into, constitutes pressure.

"As long as you're outside of it, you're not exerting any pressure on the animal. When you move inside of it, you are," Williams says. Some flight zones encompass an entire corral, so the first step may be just getting the animal used to your presence.

Williams begins by pressuring an animal, usually by moving toward it. As it moves away or otherwise responds by moving its head or shifting position, he eases up the pressure. That can mean either taking a step away from the animal, standing still or ceasing to make noise. However, he advises, don't release the pressure completely by stepping too far away. The point is to step away enough that the animal realizes it won't be constantly pressured and understands that you are not a predator.

When applying pressure, Williams offers two things to always keep in mind. "The angle at which you pressure and the amount you pressure are extremely important," he states.

**Fig. 1: Illustration of the flight zone of an animal\***



\*The size of the flight zone will vary among individual animals.

## Low-stress handling

The main cause of stress in the livestock industry, Williams says, is an inability to communicate. Many people work animals into confusion and panic because the animals don't understand what they're expected to do.

"My method of working livestock consists of learning to 'read' what the animal is telling you and changing your position so she wants to go where you want her to go," he says.

The first step to a better understanding of livestock is a change in attitude, Williams notes. He says everything an animal does is in reaction to something its handler does. The ways people position themselves cause trouble because humans are predatory animals and cattle are prey animals.

Williams explains that humans naturally want to either chase or force animals to move, which directly causes stress and causes animals to run, go the wrong way or turn to fight.

## Angle

“The angle you pressure at determines the amount of pressure that you’re putting on,” Williams says. “If animals aren’t moving and you want them to move, change the angle.” Walking toward an animal’s hip is what he calls a flat angle and doesn’t constitute much pressure. Angling toward the middle pressures more, and angling toward the front is even sharper and causes the most pressure.

Choosing which angle to take can depend on the temperament of the animal, Williams explains. A calm animal won’t respond to the small amount of pressure from movement toward the hip. However, a wilder animal may panic at that much pressure.

Angle also factors into directing animal movement.

“If you pressure an animal, and it’s not doing what you want, then you must assume that you have done something that’s not quite right, and you must move to another spot to pressure,” Williams says. Pressuring from directly behind an animal makes it nervous and causes it to turn around to see the cause of pressure.

## Amount

Applying too much pressure causes many livestock-handling problems, Williams notes. “The reason an animal breaks off and runs is because we’re exerting too much of the wrong kind of pressure,” he says, adding that too much pressure will cause a negative reaction. Handling then becomes associated with a single negative experience.

Too much pressure also causes an animal to panic and break off when faced with a gate. “She’s focusing on the excessive pressure and is not even concerned about the gate — she’s trying to get away,” Williams says.

The key to Williams’ method is to release the pressure after the animal has responded. “It’s helpful if somebody can guide you with a slight push on the shoulders,” he says, “but if they keep pushing, it doesn’t take long until you’ve had enough.”

## Practical perspective

Putting his different principles together, if Williams wants to sort out a single animal, he first discovers how much pressure the animal will take by finding its flight zone. After applying and releasing pressure to show he is not acting predatory, he discovers where the animal needs to be pressured to make it go straight and turn by trying different angles. After turning the animal in the direction he wants, he then pressures and releases until the animal willingly walks when he applies pressure.

“It doesn’t take as much pressure to keep an animal moving as it does to start one,” he notes.

To sort through a pen of cattle, Williams will begin near the gate,

pressuring the animals he wants to move out, then step back toward the gate to block an individual from leaving. He can then use the same technique to pressure other unwanted animals in the opposite direction.

When moving a group of cattle, Williams notes that he uses a crossing pattern.

“I move back and forth across. Even though I may be behind the animals all of the time, I’m not behind one animal for any length of time,” he says. By applying similar pressure to different animals in succession, no individual animal feels too pressured.

To slow down individual or group movement, Williams says, move parallel to livestock in the same direction animals are going. To speed up movement, move parallel in the opposite direction. “Animals want to continue in the direction they are headed,” he says. “When they see you coming, they will try to hurry past you.”

While Williams affirms that his method can work in a variety of circumstances and will eventually save time, he offers some cautions. Each animal or group must be approached differently, and they will respond differently, he says. “Every situation that I get in I use some of the same things, but I don’t necessarily use them in the same way.”

Williams says this method can be translated to other ways of working cattle, such as with horses, dogs, four-wheelers, and even helicopters. However, he cautions, “A four-wheeler is going to put on more pressure than somebody on foot.”

He also notes that the method will take time to thoroughly understand. “A beginner can learn something that can help them,” he says, “but this is something I’ve spent a lifetime studying and I’ve just scratched the surface on what can be done when working with animals.

“Anything worthwhile is going to take some effort.”

## Starting points

Because this method takes a great deal of practice, Ingram, who also teaches livestock-handling classes, suggests producers start working with their herd when they don’t need to accomplish anything specific — the time they normally spend checking eyes or calves. He also suggests people first practice on calm animals. “As you begin to understand these techniques better, you can move on to more challenging animals,” he says.

The first step when working with any animal, Ingram notes, is to make it comfortable with having you around. Once it’s comfortable, it can be trained to take pressure. He also notes the importance of pressuring and releasing pressure to establish



The angle at which an animal is pressured determines the amount of pressure, Williams says. Walking toward an animal’s hip doesn’t constitute much pressure. Angling toward the middle pressures more, and angling toward the front is even sharper and causes the most pressure.



Once animals begin to move, Williams says it doesn’t take as much pressure as was needed to start them. After pressuring and getting a response, Williams will release the pressure and let the animals move past him.

trust, especially if you’ve never handled them before. “If you’ve got your herd trained, they will stay trained,” he says. “But, you may have to do some more initial work with a new pen of animals.”

While it may sound complicated and confusing, Ingram says, “As you get more comfortable with those methods, you can actually achieve a lot of this stuff in relatively short periods of time.” The key, he says, is patience. “You have to be willing to invest time to learn a new skill.”

## Learning curve

Jack Martin, a veterinarian and owner of Bar M Bar Ranch, Cherryvale, Kan., compares learning this method to using your opposite hand.

“So many times you start wanting to use your right hand, because it just seems natural,” he says. But, to be successful, Martin cautions against returning to forceful ways when frustration sets in.

One way to head off frustration, he says, is to realize that each animal

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Williams says more than 3,000 people have attended his livestock handling schools, which he teaches throughout the U.S. A normal school lasts for two days and includes real handling experience, as well as learning from a video.

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— Greg Glunz

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and group of animals will respond differently. Martin says, “Be open and ready to evaluate every group of cattle differently. Realize that you’ve got to change your tactics and not try to do the same thing with every group of cattle and expect the same results.”

Even so, he says, the hard work is

worth it. “You can get a lot more done in a day and get it done a lot easier. It’ll pay huge dividends, but it also takes huge commitment.”

**Feedyard experiences**

Greg Glunz, assistant manager of Fairleigh Feed Yards, Scott City, Kan., says calming cattle as soon as they arrive at the feedyard is crucial to his operation. “The whole focus is to try to get your cattle to become more relaxed in your presence — accept you being there as not being a threat,” he says.

One of the biggest benefits he has found is easier detection of disease. Cattle that are not feeling well, he says, will more easily express it because they aren’t afraid. “Because animals aren’t perceiving you to be a predator, they’re more relaxed in your presence,” he says.

“Anytime that you’re able to utilize another tool that helps you identify cattle at an earlier stage of illness, you’ll reduce your medicine cost per head.”

Glunz also notes that it’s not easy to change an established mind-set. “We all know habits don’t change overnight,” he says, “but we’ve learned how to work with cattle instead of fight with them.”

**Real results**

For Wally Olson, Vinita, Okla., Williams’ method has provided some very real results. Olson has a cow-calf and stocker operation, feeding about 3,000 calves a year. “We used to run 3% or 4% death loss on these calves, but now we’re down to 1% or 2%,” he says. “What’s really impressive is we’ve cut our vet bill from \$20 a head down to about \$6 or \$8 a head.”

He also recognizes a decrease in his labor load. “We moved 600 or 700 cows out of a pasture that, a few years ago, took eight or 10 riders. Two of us went and did it.”

However, Olson notes that his results did not come overnight. “You really have to work at it,” Olson explains. “It’s not a simple thing.”

Even so, he still enjoys it. “I’m probably the happiest person in the world when it comes to working cattle, because I have no problems — only learning experiences,” he says. He also recommends that interested producers attend one of Williams’ stockmanship schools. “Unless they are around it, people almost don’t believe what they can do,” he says.

For more information about stockmanship and Bud Williams, visit [www.stockmanship.com](http://www.stockmanship.com) to see a calendar of upcoming stockmanship schools and find out how to receive a video. To find out about other schools teaching Williams’ methods, visit <http://bandnhandlivestocksolutions.com>. Further information about low-stress handling, including a discussion of Williams’ methods, is available in *Stockmanship*, by Steve Cote.