

# Impact of farm staff attitudes on cow behaviour and productivity



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Do words matter when we're talking to our cows? The short answer is yes – the words we use and how we say them reflect our attitude at the time – cows are very good at reading our body language. Stock people who shout and swear at cattle can negatively influence the cow's behaviour, productivity, and welfare. In turn, cows that are handled stressfully will respond with fear and 'fight-or-flight' responses which makes the work environment more stressful and lead to a risk of accidents or injuries. It is important for farm employers to provide training on safe and stress-free handling of animals – don't assume that people know how to move a cow around, even if they have previous experience of working with cattle. Temple Grandin famously said that 9 out of 10 people can be taught safe stock handling – but there is always 1 that can't be taught! If one of your staff members prefers machinery to animals -stick them on a tractor!

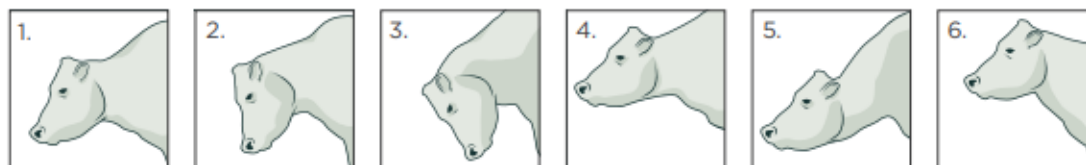
Although cows don't have complex emotions like we do (such as revenge and regret), like most mammals, they do have basic emotions such as fear. Because they are herd animals, separation anxiety is a real emotion for cows and can lead to panic and release of the stress hormone, cortisol. Management strategies such as always moving cows as pairs and making sure there are more than one cow segregated for AI etc will help. In addition, cattle handling facilities should be designed around moving animals as pairs/groups e.g. the 'bud box'.

**Spotting the danger signs: heads up, ears back, high alert** (image 6 below)

**Agitated cattle often bellow loudly and paw the ground with their hooves. The head and tail positions of cattle also give clues as to the animal's state of mind. Be on the lookout for these danger signs.**

**Common head positions:**

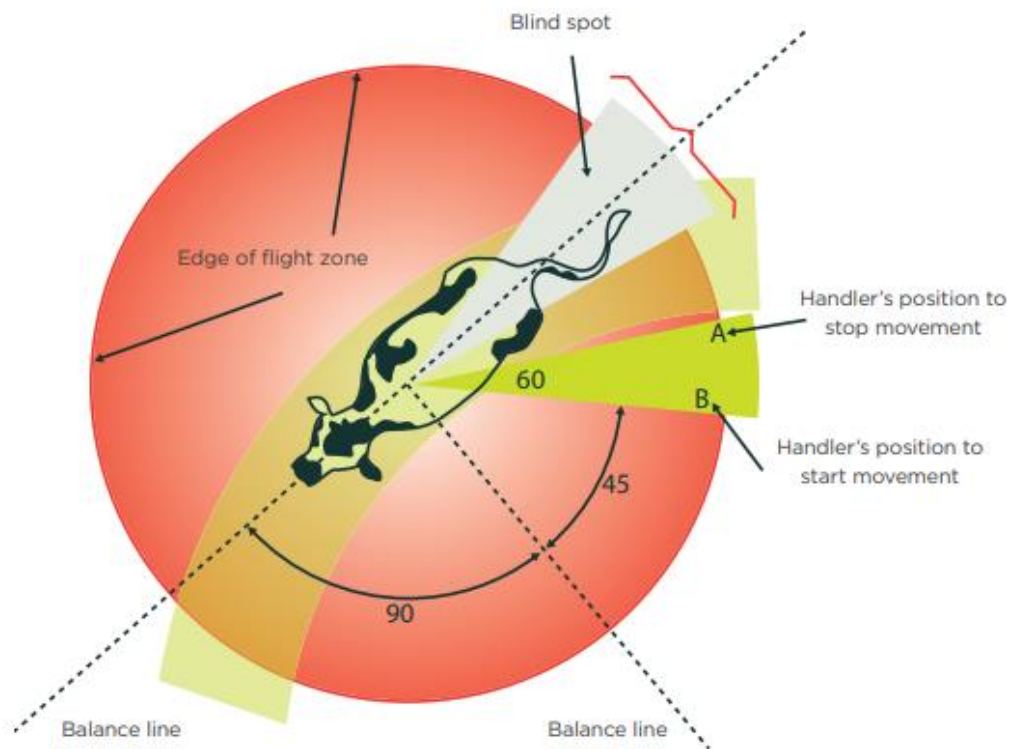
1. Neutral position
2. Slightly antagonistic position
3. Highly antagonistic position
4. Confident approach
5. Submissive approach
6. Alert before flight position



**Figure 1: Common head positions**

As a minimum, all farm staff that are handling cattle should be trained in:

- Spotting the danger signs – particularly panic mode
- Flight Zone (FZ), Pressure Zone (PZ) and Awareness Zone (AZ)
- Using balance points to move cattle without touching them
- Benefits of calm and quiet handling



Further information resources:

<https://stockmanship.com/> (inventor of the 'bud box')

<https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/agriculture/working-with-animals/working-with-cattle/safe-cattle-handling-guide>

[CowSignals®](#)

[Temple Grandin's Website](#)

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For further discussion or to help with any questions that you may have, please contact Consultant Support on [consultantsupport@kiteconsulting.com](mailto:consultantsupport@kiteconsulting.com) or 01902 851007

