



Bridging the Echo Chambers

Delving into Debate About the Impacts
of Livestock on the Environment

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One of the most hotly debated topics today is livestock's impact on the environment.

While some movements and organizations are dedicated to either reducing or eliminating cattle others consider it to be a major tool in the fight against climate change. The debate is played out in social media, corporate marketing pitches, and battling Netflix documentaries that leave consumers confused and wondering if there is a "right" way to eat to save the planet.

Livestock producers, who consider themselves to be the original environmentalists, feel under attack by those who think it is not possible to eat beef and care for the environment.

These differing opinions can have polarizing effects within families, work groups and society.

Social media makes it easier for us to stay within our own echo chambers, only interacting with people who have similar opinions and throwing rocks at those who disagree with us.



Food Water Wellness Foundation began this project intending to build a bridge between people with diverse views on food production.

We were sure that if we could mix up some ranchers with some non-meat eaters, in a spirit of respectful, thoughtful discussion, and look at where people get their information from, we could begin to break down some of those echo chambers and start building bridges.

Rather than trying to change anyone's mind – or tell them their opinions were wrong – we chose to focus on communication strategies, on fostering understanding, compassion, and empathy rather than confrontation and divisiveness.

As it happened, we learned that the same strategies would work in any situation where there is potential conflict or differing opinions. Even more surprising, or not depending on your perspective – is that the strategies farmers and ranchers use in low-stress cattle handling also translate to human relationships!

Low Stress Cattle Handling?

What Does That Have to Do with People?



1 - Dylan Biggs leading a hands-on low stress cattle handling workshop

Low stress cattle handling focuses on working with the animal, not against them. It reduces stress by understanding the animal's natural instincts, by always approaching in a calm and confident manner, using soft tones and a quiet voice. Sounds of yelling and/or whistling have been proven to raise heart rates for cattle.

Low stress cattle handlers pay attention to their animals at all times and are quick to notice signs of anxiety or distress. When they do notice those signals, they slow down, back up, and give the critter a chance to relax and think.

Strategies for Low Stress Cattle Handling

Stay calm and collected

Don't approach head on – build trust and respect

If a cow looks anxious, stops, or turns – backup, give them space, take the pressure off. If you give them an opportunity to settle down and think most will.

If cattle start running – follow at a walk. If you run after them, you give them a legitimate reason to run.

Be self-aware – know if you are feeling angry or afraid or insecure

Control your impulses – know your triggers

Don't go near your cows when you are agitated, stressed or in a bad mood! Animals will pick up on this and it will become more difficult to handle them

Don't push

Don't crowd the pen – leave room to move naturally

Take your time. Give cattle time to think.

Trust is imperative

The more you gain trust with individual animals the more you gain trust throughout the herd

No aggressive behaviour, yelling or screaming – it makes the animals heart rate go up and they become agitated.

Clear, consistent communication allows animals to relax

Remember that new situations may cause anxiety and unpredictable behaviour.

Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention

Strategies for Getting Along with People

Stay calm and collected

Don't approach head on – build trust and respect

If the person you are talking to looks anxious or uncomfortable – backup, give them space, take the pressure off. Be curious about why they are anxious or uncomfortable.

If the person starts running – don't chase them! In certain situations that could be seen as very creepy!

Be self-aware – know if you are feeling angry or afraid or insecure

Control your impulses – know your triggers

Don't engage with people when you are agitated, stressed or in a bad mood! That never ends well!

Don't push or make people feel they are backed into a corner

Don't crowd them – give them room to move naturally.

Take your time. Give people time to think

Trust is imperative

The more you gain trust with individual people the more you gain trust throughout a group

No aggressive behaviour, yelling or screaming – it makes people's heart rates go up and they become agitated.

Clear, consistent communication allows people to relax

People placed in new situations may cause anxiety and unpredictable behaviour.

Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention

COMMUNICATING ACROSS ECHO CHAMBERS

How to Have a Conversation with Someone Who Has an Opposite Opinion

Know Yourself and Know What Triggers You

Begin by learning to get along with yourself. If you don't get along with yourself, you can't get along with anybody. On any given day, you probably experience a range of emotion — excitement, unease, frustration, joy, disappointment, sadness. These often relate to specific events, such as meeting with your boss, talking current events with a friend, or sharing an opinion with someone. Your response to these events can vary based on your frame of mind and the circumstances surrounding the situation



2- Ashley, Vegan Activist



3 - Andrea, Feedlot Owner

An emotional trigger is anything — including memories, experiences, or events — that sparks an intense emotional reaction. Emotional triggers are, by definition, associated with a past experience and thus are a more intense response to a situation than is necessary or appropriate. For example, a friend may be judgmental of an opinion you express and can trigger intense anger that starts a disrespectful argument. After the emotion has subsided and you have a chance to reflect on the situation, you realize that you were triggered by a similar situation in your family when you were unheard, constantly criticized, felt helpless and out of control, and left belittled and alone. The anger resulted as an intent to survive at the time, but it was likely unnecessary in the current situation.

Knowing what your emotional triggers are and how to deal with them is a key component of emotional well-being and healthy relationships.

What Happens When You Are Triggered?

Any stressful situation - such as an emotional trigger – can activate a cascade of stress hormones that produce well-orchestrated physiological changes.

Examples of these physiological responses are increased heart rate, shallow, quickened breathing, muscle tension, and beads of sweat.

These reactions to stress are known as the **“fight, flight, or freeze”** response that evolved as a survival mechanism, enabling people (as well as other mammals) to react quickly to what may be perceived as life-threatening situations.

The carefully orchestrated, yet near-instantaneous sequence of hormonal changes and physiological responses helps someone survive a life-threatening situation.

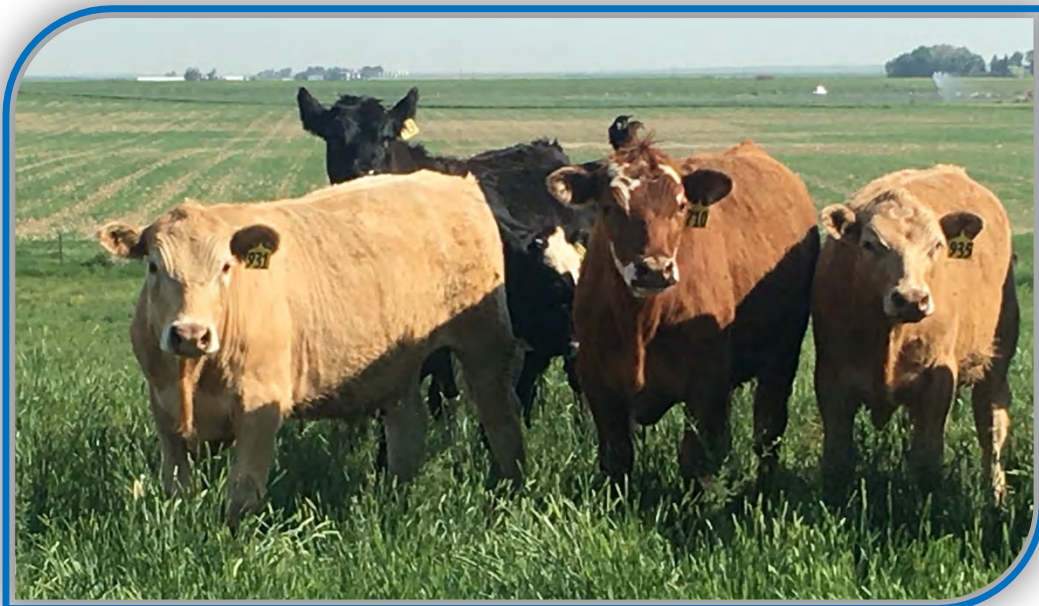
Unfortunately, the body is often unable to discern between what is, in fact, life-threatening, and what is simply uncomfortable or challenging.

Once your body has gone into an activated stress response, the brain immediately goes into survival mode, which overrides your ability to reason and think clearly.

We saw this happen in the video when Ashley said something that triggered Andrea.

Andrea recognized that she was triggered and admitted that she hadn't actually heard everything Ashley said because she was upset.

Once we have entered “fight, flight, or freeze” the likelihood of having a productive, respectful conversation with anyone is greatly reduced.



We Need a Strategy

When you are triggered, it is important to have a strategy already established to deal effectively with the trigger and with your response. Destructive arguments, disrespectful responses, and eventual violence are the result of a lack of awareness and strategy for dealing with triggers.

This is the process used in our video:

Step 1. Identify the trigger. We all get triggered from time to time. The key is to observe what one looks like for you. Triggers are activated when you feel stress in an interaction, when you have a surge of defensiveness or anger, or when you suddenly find yourself withdrawing or freezing up. They might include reminders of unwanted memories, uncomfortable topics, or another person's opinion of you. Common situations that trigger intense emotions include rejection, betrayal, unjust treatment, threatened beliefs, helplessness, loss of control, being excluded or ignored, not being heard or being able to make an impact, disapproval or criticism, feeling unwanted or unneeded, or insecurity. Andrea was triggered almost instantly at the implication that her feedlot is a "factory farm".

Step 2. Listen to your body. A key step in learning to recognize your triggers involves paying attention when situations generate a strong emotional response. As emotions begin to surge, you might experience physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, upset stomach, shakiness or dizziness, or sweaty palms. In the video Andrea recognized the trigger, stopped the conversation by saying "I'm feeling triggered", and both she and Ashley stepped back to examine the trigger more carefully.

Step 3. Step back – compassionately. You must be intentional to override the body's natural stress response by stepping back, taking a breath, being aware of your breathing, appreciating your body's capacity to help you survive, and compassionately reminding yourself that you are safe in this moment.

Step 4. Trace The Roots. Quickly check when you may have met an anxiety or stress inducing situation before. Often, especially when you are on the verge of a potentially destructive argument, you may need to put this step on hold for later. When the trigger surfaces, it is good enough to simply acknowledge to yourself that this current situation was triggered by something in your past.

Step 5. Get Curious. This is a pivotal step that involves two kinds of curiosity. First, it's about curiosity of your own emotional response, and being open to understanding its roots. The second kind of curiosity, which is relevant in a potential conflict, is to be curious about the other person and the origins of their opinion. Andrea and Ashley both got curious as they contrasted what each heard the other say and learned more about the effect the words we choose may have.

From F-State (Fight, Flight, Freeze, Freaking Out) to C-State (Calm, Clear, Collected and Caring)

Okay, you've been paying attention to what triggers you, you know how you react, you also know that any kind of productive person/person or even person/animal interaction is not possible when you are in that F-State.

So how do you slow and calm yourself down enough to get back to the C-State and have a respectful, productive conversation?

Focus on what you can control. Depending on the situation, it may help to go for a walk or have a cup of tea, just do whatever relaxes and calms you.

In the video we used the RAIN Process:

Recognize (Step Back)

Accept (Appreciate)

Investigate (Talk and Learn)

Non-Attachment (Let Go)



Creating Unity Around Differences: Bridge The Gap by Opening the Door to Conversation

A lot of problems in the world would disappear
if we talked to each other instead of about each other.



The process we used for our feedlot owner/vegan conversation was:

1. **Decide on a goal.** What is the reason for having this conversation? What topic will be the focus? In our video we had three goals: to understand but not necessarily to agree, to learn something, and to like each other at the end. The topic was a controversial documentary film on beef production's impact on the environment that each had watched prior to the conversation.
2. **Establish some ground rules.** Ours were to be respectful of each other, not to "fix" each other, not to evangelize, and to be honest.
3. **Decide who will go first.** We began with Ashley (vegan) sharing her perspective on the impact of beef production on the environment. It did not take long for Andrea (feedlot owner) to be triggered and stop even hearing the conversation. When that happened, everyone stopped and backed up. Through a process of each repeating what they heard the other person say, and listening with curiosity and empathy, trying hard to "ask not tell" both Andrea and Ashley eventually felt that they were heard and understood. The conversation continued until each person felt able to fill in the missing pieces and felt understood.

4. **Consciously listen with compassion and empathy** and try to understand the other person's point of view. Neither Ashley's nor Andrea's mind was changed regarding beef's impact on the environment, but they both understood more about why the other thinks the way they do, and especially the importance of using accurate, non-inflammatory language. It is okay to not always agree. The important thing is to disagree respectfully, and to be **curious**. By the end of the conversation our vegan and our feedlot owner even liked each other well enough to go for a meal together!

Handy Tips:

- * Accept that it may take at least three times – don't give up.
- * Take time to think, to understand first. Listen, pay attention.
- * When you get frustrated get curious.
- * Practice compassion and empathy. People learn to be mean or malicious as a way to protect themselves. Underneath malicious behaviour is someone feeling hurt and scared. When people are afraid their survival brain (F-State) kicks in and they can't think clearly.
- * Don't take resistance personally.
- * Watch for triggers. If you are the one who is being triggered, follow the RAIN steps.
- * Slow down and step back. In the video Andrea said, "I'm feeling triggered", and then both she and Ashley got curious about the cause. Eventually it became clear that the words Ashley chose had not been intended to personally hurt or insult, and the two were able to move forward and continue a respectful discussion.
- * Understand – don't react.

One of the things we heard from all sides of the “beef producer/environmentalist/non-meat eater” discussions was that each felt the others were uninformed, and that if they just knew the facts they would eat meat, or not eat meat, or get rid of all their cows.

We know that the internet is full of facts and alternative facts. If you look hard enough you can find facts and research to support just about any hypothesis.

Our differences are what make us unique, special and interesting. It is okay to not always agree. The important thing is to disagree respectfully, and to be curious. Take the time to learn on a one-to-one level why someone believes what they do. No judgement, no evangelizing, just understanding. Ask instead of telling.

Although Andrea and Ashley were each nervous about talking to the other and got off to a bit of a rocky start, they achieved their goals of understanding but not agreeing, learning something, and of liking each other at the end. When the conversation and video were over, they shared a meal, and began to lay the groundwork for the beginnings of an unlikely friendship.

BRIDGING THE ECHO CHAMBERS

**DELVING INTO
DEBATE ABOUT
THE IMPACTS
OF LIVESTOCK
ON THE
ENVIRONMENT**

**Creating a deeper understanding
of food production through:**

- **Effective communication**
- **Informed discussions**
- **Mutual trust building**

**[www.foodwaterwellness.org/
bridging-echo-chambers.html](http://www.foodwaterwellness.org/bridging-echo-chambers.html)**