

## Follow the Leader

*Laura Paine, Columbia County Crops and Soils Agent; Kory Ryan, and Dick Ryan*

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Dick Ryan's calves are a pretty orderly bunch. Every year he brings a rowdy herd of 1000-plus stockers from Alabama, Illinois, Missouri, and Minnesota, and turns them into a group of well-trained troops, marching in step from one paddock to the next. Actually, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but Dick and his sons Kory and Shane place a lot of value on keeping their herds in line, both literally and figuratively. How do they do it? Their own management skills are a large part of it, and a couple of good stockdogs help, but another key player is the leader calf. Just as a business needs a good supervisor, every herd needs a good leader.

As everyone who's managed livestock knows, every herd, whether it's a closely related herd of dairy cows or a pieced together group of stockers, will exhibit a range of personalities. Although many of their behaviors are instinctive, a group of animals is likely to be as diverse personality-wise as a group of people working in an office. And just like an office, we need to manage those divergent personalities for the general good of the business. The general tone of the group is dictated by whatever influence is strongest. The Ryan's goal is to keep the herd focused and calm, but just like a gossipy staff person can wreck havoc with company morale and productivity, flighty animals can make the whole herd nervous. An individual's panic attack can cause everyone to spook.

A good panic can blow a day's worth of gain for the whole herd. Let's see...2 pounds of gain per day times 300 head times \$0.60 per pound....that comes to \$360. No small deal. In the Ryan herd, the leader calf helps keep the life of the herd orderly, maximizing their gains. A good leader animal leads by example. His confidence and focus on grazing calms the whole herd.

Understanding herd structure.

To make the best use of leader animals, it helps to understand the social dynamics of herds.

Herding behavior is closely related to grazers' role as prey animals in the wild. The hierarchy within herds has developed over many centuries as a way of organizing to protect themselves from predators.

Every animal's primary motivation is self-preservation: feeding itself and ensuring that its own offspring survive to pass on its genes to future generations. Herding behavior is cooperative. It involves sacrificing individual motivations in exchange for the benefits of being part of a group (not unlike human communities). It's a sort of social contract among animals.

In herding species, the herd provides safety and protection for members, but requires that each animal helps protect not only its own offspring but those of others as well. By working together, they are able to protect a majority of the herd from predators. The organizing influence of the leader animal is what makes it work. Without good leadership, there is little benefit to the individual to being part of a herd. Good stockmen and women can utilize this social structure to their advantage.

The key is understanding the motivation of the leader calf to lead. In contrast to human communities, an animal's role in the herd is dictated exclusively by instinct and hormones. Dominant animals are literally 'born leaders' as a result of aggressiveness, size and other hormonally and genetically controlled factors.

Your goal is to have him exhibit a balance of behaviors, to exert a positive influence over the herd, but to obey your directions. His goal is to dominate the rest of the animals and put them in their place (hormones again). He can have too much independence. He must know that you are in charge. After all, you're the CEO—he's just middle management!

How to recognize leadership potential.

Over the years, Dick and his sons have recognized the value of a good leader calf and have made efforts to capitalize on the natural tendencies of these 'born leaders'. Aside from keeping the herd calm and focused on grazing, the leader calf is usually the first to respond to the manager's calls or to the dogs, and he leads the herd to a new paddock, to water, to feed bunks. He eliminates bunching in hot weather and keeps the group moving and grazing. He keeps the herd from getting spooked by deer, strange dogs, or other distractions. And he modifies poor disposition animals, helping them to focus on grazing so that they will gain weight efficiently. He creates order in the life of the herd.

A leader calf generally combines size and attitude. It helps for him to outweigh his colleagues by a couple hundred pounds, but an ounce of aggressiveness can go as far as a pound of body weight. Dick and Kory have seen a lot of leader calves come and go and they know the characteristics that make some better than others. Even at an early age, a leader calf shows certain qualities of independence which set him apart from the rest. He is quite tame, has a calm demeanor, and makes a lot of noise. Vocalization seems to be part of the personality of the leader calf (bosses always like to hear the sound of their own voices!).

As the herd becomes familiar with the Ryans' routines, the leader calf will be the first to move to the feed bunks. He comes when they call and the rest of the herd follows him. The leader calf must be confident and independent enough to command the respect of the other calves, but this sometimes translates into an animal that is hard to handle.

Petty dictators.

The Ryans have had leader calves that were more trouble than they're worth. Establishing dominance occurs early in the season through aggressive behavior: riding other calves, head-butting, and pushing. If no one animal wins these skirmishes, or if the dominant animal continues his aggressive behavior, the leader can be as big a problem as a nervous animal. When this happens, it can be dealt with in one of two ways. The problem animal can be moved to another herd (which means that another rivalry may occur to choose a new leader), or additional calves can be added to the herd in hopes of someone else taking over the lead.

The first thing Dick and Kory do when they bring in a new herd is assess the leadership potential. They look for larger more aggressive animals, but ones that appear fairly calm. If a herd is pretty uniform in size, they'll take a larger calf from another herd to be the leader. Usually, the herd will respond and give this larger animal their respect.

And once they have identified good leader calves, the Ryans will often utilize them in several successive herds. That animal will be held back and placed with a new herd of young stockers. An animal that is familiar with a pasture system can help get a fresh set of steers off to a good start. The leader will get the herd into a daily routine sooner and eliminate several weeks of rivalry within the herd to determine who's boss. The energy expended among animals battling for leadership is put into weight gain instead. Familiarity with the pasture system allows a leader calf to bring a herd into a new paddock with little of the disturbance usually associated with new surroundings.

Leaders Improve Efficiency.

Getting things off to a good start with a leader calf not only improves rate of gain, but it saves time and money. Fewer fence challenges mean less time rounding up loose cattle and less time and money fixing fences. A good leader calf can contribute substantially to making your system run smoothly.

Attention to herd structure has the biggest impact on systems involving young, growing animals which are brought in, maintained for short periods before being sold or moved on. These would include all stockers, including Holstein steers, but also heifer rearing operations. Although dairy animals are often more familiar with humans than the stockers the Ryans work with, they can be pretty dense about grazing if they've come from a confinement herd. A good beef heifer or an older cow can help a herd of Holstein heifers learn a rotational system and get down to the work of grazing and gaining weight.

Even in more stable dairy or cow-calf herds, having a really good leader animal is valuable. Sometimes the dominant animal in a dairy herd can be an obstruction to a smooth running system. Regardless of what class of livestock you raise, understanding herd dynamics and actively shaping herd structure can make your life a lot easier.

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Kory Ryan has worked along side his father, Dick, for the last 7 years in between high school and college sessions. He will finish his Master's degree in Human Performance - Exercise & Sport Science at the University of Wisconsin @ LaCrosse in May of 2002. He can be reached via email at [koryedoff@yahoo.com](mailto:koryedoff@yahoo.com).