

# BEYOND TECHNICAL SKILLS

Staying safe when handling cattle

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 **NTS Ag**  
NON-TECHNICAL SKILLS IN AGRICULTURE

# RISKS AND RISK MANAGEMENT

In the past year (2017/2018), being injured by cattle caused the most deaths in agriculture within the UK (8 deaths out of a total of 33).<sup>1</sup> For example, a farm partner was crushed by cattle after entering a calf pen during calving.<sup>2</sup>

## RESEARCH SUGGESTS THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS CAN INCREASE THE RISK:<sup>3</sup>

- ▶ **Working with unfamiliar or unsettled animals** (newly calved cattle, new cattle introduced to the herd, bulls displaying signs of anger)
- ▶ **Non-routine tasks** (hoof trimming or belly clipping, veterinary work)

- ▶ **Unsuitable handling facilities** (makeshift equipment, unstable crushes)
- ▶ **Unrestrained cattle** (especially in enclosures)
- ▶ **Poor technical and non-technical skills of the handlers**

## MANAGING THE RISKS – GENERAL PRINCIPLES<sup>4</sup>

- ✓ Suitable handling facilities, regularly checked and maintained
- ✓ A race and a crush adapted to your needs
- ✓ Ensuring training and competence of workers
- ✓ Culling regime for any aggressive cattle



# HANDLING CATTLE

## WHAT REALLY MATTERS

**The handler, the cattle and the facilities** are the three elements which came up as important in a study with Swedish dairy farmers which investigated farmer risk perception in cattle handling.<sup>5</sup> Participants mentioned that these elements, as well as their interaction, impact risks and safety when handling cattle.

### THE HANDLER AND NON-TECHNICAL SKILLS IN HANDLING CATTLE

Technical skills are extremely important in handling cattle and specialised training is available from colleges and individual training providers. Ability to use the equipment provided is a requirement. Furthermore, keeping the cattle calm, without using force or shouting, is also paramount.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, technical skills are not enough. Non-technical skills (NTS), a set of special social and thinking skills, are also necessary for safe and effective task performance<sup>6</sup> and appear to be used in agriculture<sup>7</sup>, including in cattle handling and lone working.<sup>8</sup>

NTS complement technical skills and are specific to each industry – they cannot exist in isolation from technical competence.





## Which NTS are important in cattle handling?

When asked about NTS involved in the prevention of risk and the maintenance of safety in agriculture in general<sup>7</sup> and in cattle handling scenarios in particular<sup>8</sup>, UK and Irish farmers mentioned the following skills as useful:

### TEAMWORK AND COMMUNICATION

**Co-ordinating:** Splitting a task into specific activities and then sharing these among the team

**Talking:** Sharing information about plans, locations and hazards

### SITUATION AWARENESS

**Looking:** Keeping an eye on the cattle and surroundings

**Comprehension:** Understanding animal behaviour

**Anticipation:** Predicting consequences of animal behaviours

### DECISION-MAKING

**Assessing:** Ongoing assessment of risks associated with animals and equipment

**Considering:** Identifying potential options in risky situations

**Planning:** Considering the outcome of different behaviours in order to manage any risks

### EXAMPLES OF GOOD NTS BEHAVIOURS

- ✓ **TEAMWORK** - Deciding which tasks need extra help and bringing in additional handlers, such as relief cover
- ✓ **COMMUNICATION** – Communicating with others when working remotely, by sharing plans and location via mobile phone or walkie talkie
- ✓ **SITUATION AWARENESS** – Maintaining awareness of animal behaviour, especially when dealing with bulls, understanding signs of anger or distress and predicting consequences of dangerous animal behaviour
- ✓ **DECISION-MAKING** – Recognising risky situations, formulating solutions based on experience, mentally simulating potential outcomes, and adapting to changing circumstances



# A FEW THINGS TO REMEMBER<sup>9</sup>

**PLAN** an escape route or a refuge before working with cattle, in case animals become aggressive

**ASSESS RISK** depending on how frequently the animal has been handled and the task you are performing

**MAINTAIN SITUATION AWARENESS** around cattle, especially when handling new-born calves, cows with calves, cows on heat, or bulls

**READ ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR** in order to detect signs of aggression

**PREPARE** the appropriate handling and safety equipment before the task, thus reducing the risk of injury and animal distress

**COMMUNICATE** your plans and location when working remotely

**BRING IN EXTRA HELP** if the task requires an additional pair of hands

**ENSURE** handlers have good technical and non-technical skills

**MAINTAIN STANDARDS** by regularly checking and maintaining your facilities, especially the crush, gates, and fences

**MANAGE STRESS LEVELS** and always treat cattle in a calm manner







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