

# CALVING EASE

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## LEARNING A SKILL

Stop and think about the most recent skill you've learned. Think of one where another person showed you how to do it. And, they stayed with you to coach you until you got it "right." Got it in mind? Now, think about your skill as I describe my recent experience.

We recently installed a computer network at the vet clinic. Cables run everywhere and offer connection to a single large computer called a server. All of us can save files on the server. All of us can pull up, read and even print any file on the server. Great. Dr. Virkler has a note on parlor management. I can read and print it.

But, to start with I had no idea how to get into the server from my desktop computer. Our consultant, Jack, said, "Oh, that's easy." "Easy" my foot! I didn't have any idea even where to start. So, Jack goes through the steps (only four of them) once. Then he sits me in the chair and says, "Now, you do it." He coached me patiently through the four steps. Then he reached over and went click, click and all was gone. "Try it again," he said. I can't remember accurately now but we must have done this four or five times. He advised me to try it again later in the day and then again the next day. After a couple of days I found that accessing the server files actually was easy – I had learned the skill correctly and well.

### Learning a skill correctly and well

Just because you or I have learned a skill does not mean that we know how to perform it correctly. We could easily have learned it incorrectly. The steps are not performed in the right order? A step or two is left out? An individual step is done wrong? These are all possibilities.

Remember the saying, "Practice makes perfect?" Well, it is really true that practice drills into us how to perform a task – that is, it makes our performance more permanent. But if we start out doing the skill wrong, what does practice accomplish? We get really good at doing the skill incorrectly!

Learning a skill depends on being shown how to do it correctly. That means the mentors or teachers must know how to do it correctly themselves. If I'm going to learn how to put a metal eartag in a newborn calf correctly the person showing me how to do it has to be able to perform the task in the proper manner. Even better the teacher tells me why the steps are done in a certain order. I learn what to watch for to see the each step is done right before going on to the next. So, the first step in learning a skill correctly is to find a skillful teacher.

Secondly, I must practice the skill while the teacher watches. Jack watched me at the computer. The first couple of times I made errors. He saw them and tactfully helped me correct them. Practice while he observed is an essential part of learning a skill. We have to remember when teaching skills to others that it is not enough to show how a job is done and then walk away. Let's use the eartag example. Just tagging a calf and saying, "See, that's how it's done," and walking away doesn't work well. Having the calf care person tag several more calves while we watch and evaluate their performance is essential if the skill is to be learned correctly. We check to see that the tag is placed in the tool correctly (not upside down). We check to see that the tag is not placed too close to the tip of the ear. We check to see that learner does not shove the fold of the tag up against the ear, but it's left out about a pencil width to allow for growth.

### Performance often gets sloppy

Familiarity with a job can be both good and bad. The good part is that often we don't have to think about every little part. The skill gets sort of automatic. I think often of washing nursing bottles this way. In goes lukewarm water, shake, shake, dump, into hot washwater, in goes the bottle brush, brush sides, bottom, get all the corners at the bottom and top, dump, into acid rinse, onto the drying rack. Bottle after bottle.

But familiarity can be bad, also. If we are not careful we start to skip steps. The bottle doesn't seem to have much milk in it so skip the rinse – straight into the hot wash water. Or, if we are not careful we start to get sloppy performing a step – the brush just goes up and down a couple of times (so much for the corners) and out it comes. The hot wash water will do the job? Not really but we've done the job so many times it has become truly mindless.

Every once in while we need to get someone to watch us do our jobs. This is especially true for jobs that are critical to keeping calves alive, healthy and rapidly growing. If we give them permission, another person can watch and ask us why we are doing this or that. It's a productive use of our time to do this for another person, too. The objective is not to point fingers. Not to say, "Ah, ha! I caught you." The purpose is to find the sloppy spots and fix them before they become nasty habits, which ultimately depress the health and growth of our calves.