



Ranch Management Lesson #1 – Listen.

By Aaron Crowley

Shortly after turning 21, I moved to Montana to spend six months working on a small cattle ranch high up in the Beartooth Mountain Range. Every single day was an adventure, a hillside rodeo, or near death experience...occasionally for me, but usually for the animals in my care.

The adventures ranged from fighting fires started by lightening, to four by fouring beside cliffs, to killing rattlesnakes, to walking mile after mile fixing barb wire fences mangled by a marauding herd of a hundred pack mules. And with them all I learned lessons that apply wonderfully to life and business.

For example: the pack mules that routinely battered the barbed wire fences I was appointed to repair, taught me just how important it is to listen when one's livelihood is on the line.

The mules in question were actually owned by a Yellowstone outfitter who paid to keep them on the ranch, so they could feed up in the hills during the winter. He'd drop them off in late September and pick them up in late May.

On the morning of the appointed pick up date, we had to move the beasts out of the hills and into a series of big corrals so they could be roped, haltered, and packed into trailers for their trip back to Yellowstone Park. As Randy (the ranch manager) and I rode up the bottom of a giant rim rocked canyon to find them, we opened gates along the way creating an unobstructed route back to the corrals.

We left them open because, as the manager put it, "Once these mules get going down the canyon, its going to be somewhat of a controlled stampede and there wont be time to open them." In other words, if the gates weren't open, the mules would run right through them. Once we found them and got them moving, they *really* got moving! So much so that by the time I caught up them, they were already through the first gate.

I must mention here a rule that had been drummed into my city slicker skull from my first day on the ranch, "ALWAYS shut gates...ALWAYS!"

Rapidly approaching the still open gate, I was struck by a surge of panic...do I stop to close it or continue on? In the excitement of the adventure to come, I had not listened to all of Randy's instructions about what to do with the gates when we were through them.

Well, I stopped to close the gate and by the time I was back on my horse and charging to catch up, the *stampede* was completely out of sight. I didn't see them again until I sheepishly approached the corrals about a ½ an hour later, after closing all of the gates along the way. The animals were safely installed in the pens and milling around peacefully.

The manager was not so serene.

My failure to heed the instructions of my boss, regarding the do-or-die nature of the work, nearly cost me my job.

In this day and age, listening to the wants and needs of the customer is a do-or-die discipline. Customer preferences and purchasing habits are changing faster than a stampeding herd of pack mules headed for home. Make sure you are listening to what they are telling you. If you don't, it will cost you the job.