

Cattle, the Importance of Maintaining Fences-and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in law school, I lived on a cattle ranch in Albemarle County, Virginia. The ranch was over 550 acres, and the cows used to wander all through the property as large groups, eating grass, mooing, sleeping (standing up, as they do), having baby cows and doing what cows do. It was a really fun experience to spend two years living directly next to these cows, watching them go about their day-to-day lives.

Since the area where the cows wandered was so large, I rarely saw any people on the property at all. Just cows. In fact, in the two years I lived on the farm the only people I ever saw were two ranchers, who went around fixing the fences. This father and son duo lived in a large house on a hill, which was a couple of miles from the property. They used to drive down in their pickup truck and walk the fields, checking out the fences that surrounded the entire property.

The ranchers took the fences seriously. At least once a month I would see someone walking the length of the fence, checking to make sure that the fence was stable and that there was no place where the cows could get out. In a way, from my perspective, raising cattle seemed to be about nothing more than maintaining the fences: As long as the fences were maintained, everything would be perfectly fine. The cattle could find food, water and so forth on the property. The only danger to their health and survival was that they could possibly wander out.

These ranchers seemed to live a good life. They drove new trucks, lived in a large house, and seemed to have a lot of free time for "gentlemanly" pursuits. They even raised hounds for fox hunting, which used to chase foxes throughout the property. One time a hound stopped right in front of me. I heard one of the farmers talking and realized that the hound was being given instructions by the farmer via a small speakerphone on its collar. The hound heard the instructions and started off in some direction, with a herd of at least 20 other hounds yelping behind it.

A couple of times a year I used to see tractors driving across the property, making giant bales of hay for the cattle to eat. Other than this, it seemed that the main task of these ranchers was to constantly check the fences.

I heard from a man who rented some neighboring land to the cow farmers that these guys made hundreds of thousands of dollars a year watching over the cows.

"That's incredible," I said. "What is involved in the business?"

He told me it was not that complex of a business, and that "the biggest challenge is just maintaining fences."

A cow is actually worth quite a bit of money. Well over \$1,000--and some are worth much more when they are full-grown. I never had any idea they were so valuable. When you think about cows, though, there are a lot of [marketing concepts](#) that come to mind. For example, the whole idea of "branding" comes from the practice of imprinting cows with the rancher's signature, so that people do not confuse the rancher's cows with someone else's cows. There are actually many lessons you can learn from cattle ranching that are related to your career and life.

I remember thinking about the idea of being a rancher for some time. It seemed like a pretty easy job and to this day I am not sure I understand why more people do not do it. If all you have to do is maintain fences, then it does not seem all that difficult, especially compared to many other jobs out there.

However, maintaining fences is more difficult than one might first realize. In the case of the 550+ acre property I lived on, there were literally miles of fences, and stuff was happening to them all the time:

- A tree might have fallen on a portion of the fence.
- A fence could have gotten old and might have broken apart.
- A gate might have been opened by a trespasser on the property and not been closed.
- Termites might have eaten through a portion of the fence.
- A cow might have broken a fence.

I have no full grasp of the myriad of problems that the fence could experience, but maintaining a fence on a cattle ranch is quite serious business. As a rancher, if you do not maintain the fence, all sorts of things can go wrong--and you can lose your cows.

Like feudal lords, the ranchers looked down from their hilltop home, upon the miles of land where their cows wandered. The ranchers seemed to have a lot of time for leisure and fun. However, they also realized that if their fences were broken and their cows were to escape, their entire livelihood would be at risk--millions of dollars worth of cows could be stolen, or could wander off and disappear into the hundreds of square miles of forest that were adjacent to the property. Thus, the ranchers used every means within their power to make sure that they protected their cattle and that their fences were always maintained.

While most of the world population is not made up of ranchers, we all have our own *cattle*--meaning certain assets that we need to keep *fenced in*, which are always at risk of escaping us. Our cattle are:

- our employers,
- our friends,
- our significant others,
- our [business associates](#),
- our customers and clients,
- people who are loyal to us.

If we are going to be successful and reach our full potential, we need to make sure that we have fences around all of these things, and that we always know where these people are. We need fences to keep some people in, and to keep others out. We need to maintain our fences. When you have well maintained fences around the things that are important to you, you always know where they are. You know the state of your relationships when you keep people close by. If you do not maintain these fences, then you could be in for problems.

One of the best ways of maintaining fences with friends, for example, is to always be in contact with them, go out with them and show an interest in their lives. If you do not do this, your friends will find someone else who will. It sounds crude, but you simply cannot expect people to remain loyal to you and more unless you are constantly maintaining contact with them. Staying in touch with people via phone calls, emails, cards, and by spending time with them is a perfect example of maintaining your fences.

In business there are people who maintain contact with me like clockwork every few months. They may do this for years and then, one day, they ask for something. I usually give them whatever they are asking for. If they had not maintained contact with me, I am pretty sure I would not have.

With employers, you need to realize that they are constantly receiving résumés from people that want your job--just as there are people out there who are trying to steal a rancher's cattle. Therefore, you need to make yourself as valuable to your employer as you possibly can, and you need to maintain fences with your employer all the time. If you do not maintain your fences, sooner or later you may be out of a job. This means:

- Constantly making your employer aware of the good you are doing.
- Making yourself invaluable to your employer and staying up on your industry and learning new skills.
- Making sure you do the best work you possibly can at all times, and making sure the employer knows you are there.

A good fence can protect you from being laid off. When you maintain your fences, you remain in the good graces of your employer at all times.

In addition, if you are perceived as someone who has "wandered outside the fence", you are not as valuable to your employer. Nothing is more important than being seen as part of the herd. A cow that constantly makes problems and goes outside of the fence is a "problem cow", which causes the rancher a lot of grief. The cow that is always going outside of the fence is more likely to be slaughtered, confined to a barn, and so forth. Farmers want cows that stay with the herd.

Going outside the fence can mean many things in your job:

- not getting along with coworkers is equivalent to going outside the fence.
- not following instructions is like going outside the fence.
- talking poorly about your employer is like going outside the fence.
- creating problems at work is like going outside the fence.

There are all sorts of things that people do that are problematical in their jobs. You need to stay inside the fence in order to do the best that you can in your [job and career](#). You also need to maintain your fences with everyone who is important to you in your career and life.

THE LESSON

You must establish strong, well-maintained fences around everything in your life, and be aware of who is within them. To maintain fences with friends, for example, maintain constant contact with them and demonstrate interest in your lives; you must maintain fences with employers in a similar manner in order to remain in their good books. Staying within your fences will enable you to do your best in your life and career.