

OUTSIDE THE BOX

The inquisitive tabby

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



Focus, discipline and efficiency are highly valued by business leaders. Especially in times of uncertainty and

volatility, sticking to the game plan is a strategy that seems to be the best means to minimize risk.

Management often withdraws from active experimentation and is less likely to question long-standing assumptions when stress is pressing on the business.

Sticking to the “known” certainly appears logical. After all, we all know that curiosity killed the cat. However, did it?

The body of evidence arising from the experiences of both emerging and established companies suggests those organizations that encourage and practice curiosity have decided advantages compared to their status-quo-dependent peers. Harvard Business School’s Francesca Gino has demonstrated that cultivating curiosity across the organization increases the capacity of both leaders and employees to better adjust and adapt to change. Curiosity sparks the brain to approach decisions and problems with a higher level of creativity. Curiosity leads to questioning, questions lead to deeper thinking, and deeper thinking yields better solutions.

Curiosity can be cultivated. It can also be stifled. Gino’s research found that while many business leaders said they wanted their teams to exhibit healthy curiosity, their behavior often signaled to employees that conformance was

the desired outcome. As a result, questions were left unasked, critical thinking was discouraged and innovation was restricted. However, when curiosity was modeled and supported by forward-thinking leaders, people across the organization began to move beyond their assumptions and rote approaches to engage other perspectives, insights and knowledge far beyond the companies’ own boundaries. Furthermore, collaboration within the team increases, constructive thinking replaces defensive responses and the problem-solving process gets better when curiosity is unleashed.

Leaders who take the time to ask questions, to challenge assumptions and to embrace learning develop a competitive edge.

Grow your curiosity

Agricultural leaders are advised to learn from their corporate brethren, and winter is well-suited to growing curiosity in the realm of ranching. A few steps to enhance curiosity include:

1. Read broadly. Choose material from business, history, engineering and the sciences.
2. Interact with bright people outside normal day-to-day or industry contacts.
3. Ask questions. Do not overthink the process. The key is to start without any concern as to whether the questions seem dumb or too far-fetched.
4. Grow the storehouse of knowledge while looking for how disparate pieces of

information might fit together. Solutions come from connecting the dots that comprise a deep array of learning.

5. Keep growing expertise while simultaneously giving in to native curiosity to engage broad subject areas and perspectives. This process is not a call to ignore key business or industry knowledge, but rather to expand the focus to encompass new and interesting approaches to problem-solving.

Suggested reading list

A good place to start is with the books listed below. Each takes a different approach, but all will enhance curiosity and how it might be useful to individuals and organizations:

- *Rebel Talent: Why It Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life* by Francesca Gino
- *Leonardo da Vinci* by Walter Isaacson
- *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* by Chris Lowney
- *The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America’s Leading Design Firm* by Tom Kelley and Jonathan Littman
- *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* by Tom Kelley and David Kelley

Stepping away from what we “know for certain” in exchange for allowing our minds to wonder, to



examine ranching from new perspectives and to ask questions that stretch our thinking will most certainly create value. It’s time to let the inquisitive tabby out of the bag. |

Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.

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