

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## The journey to excellence

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Human beings are wired for achievement and, more importantly, the pursuit of excellence. As a

case in point, Neal Bascomb's best-selling narrative of the quest by Roger Bannister, John Landy and Wes Santee to break through the four-minute-mile barrier in 1952 describes the arduous pathway of three unique athletes.

However, *The Perfect Mile*, while nearly 300 pages long, spends only a few sparse pages describing Bannister's epic achievement. The vast majority of the work describes instead the pursuit and then the quest for the next standard of achievement once the four-minute mile had been eclipsed.

The central message is that merit lies not so much in hitting the standard, but rather in the work, transformation, sacrifice and commitment that precede attainment.

### Value of the pursuit

While moments of victory are indeed to be experienced in celebration, it is rare that the final score becomes the ultimate treasure. Rather, those who attain standards of excellence will point to the insights gained from failed attempts, the power of gratitude, the capacity to overcome regret, and ultimately the ability to find meaning and joy in each season of their journey toward achieving their aspirations.

Harvesting value from the pursuit of excellence, regardless of the field of endeavor, is not reserved solely for the victor. Those who shared the race are also positively transformed.

The standard or measurement by which we gauge our progress may be established externally and by the internal compass that focuses our time, talent and treasure. Standards of excellence cannot be truly formulated, pursued nor attained in the absence of systems-wide considerations.

Not long ago, a reporter was interviewing our team about our initiative to bring a deeper understanding of virtue as it relates to business into the conversations we have with entrepreneurs.

His skeptical question: "What does virtue have to do with business?"

My response, "Everything!"

Attaining an objective is important, but lasting value — as Bannister, Landy and Santee taught us — is created by the manner in which the goal was achieved. For example, it would be an awesome view to stand atop a Himalayan peak; however, being deposited there by helicopter creates a very different experience than if you had arrived at the summit via a challenging climb.

We must also be discerning in choosing the standard to which we aspire. As the late Stephen Covey reminded us: Nothing is more disappointing than to have exerted extreme effort only to find that our ladder was leaning on the wrong wall.



**Merit lies not so much in hitting the standard but rather in the work, transformation, sacrifice and commitment that precede attainment.**

the way to finished weight. Replacement heifers from herds that have overemphasized growth rates may prove to be too large

### Finding our standards

By what standards do we measure success in the cattle business? To answer this question, we must ask ourselves two additional questions:

- ▶ Is the standard we seek worthy and appropriate?
- ▶ Are there means to attain the standards that undermine our overall success?

For example, perhaps we chose to seek a herd pregnancy rate of 95% or greater. What are the direct and indirect consequences of attaining that standard of performance? While exceptional breeding rates produce more calves, what was the cost to hit the goal? It is very possible to have incurred excessive feed costs in its attainment that may ultimately prove to be unprofitable.

Heavy weaning weights are often touted as a standard of excellence, but weaning weight is of limited value for those producers who retain calves to yearling stage or all

to have profitable reproductive rates. Management systems that maximize total pounds produced but decimate the forage resource ultimately will have failed to meet an appropriate standard.

Thus we must choose carefully the standards by which to measure success. Let us be reminded of the words of Eiji Toyoda, former chairman of Toyota Motor Co.: "Doing the right things ... is a calling from on high. Do it boldly, do as you believe, do as you are."

Lasting excellence is created and defined by the journey far more than by the destination. |



Editor's note: In "Outside the Box," a regular, separate 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.