

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Aristotle and cowboy wisdom

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Why is common sense so scarce?

Perhaps it was this question that drove Aristotle to devote his

immense talent to the pursuit and practice of wisdom. While his predecessors invested their energy into pondering on the abstract nature of wisdom, Aristotle recognized that virtue was only conjecture without action. Practical wisdom is the moderating force that centers decisions, guides choices and molds behavior.

Author John Bradshaw describes practical wisdom as “the ability to do the right thing at the right time for the right reason.”

However, to achieve Bradshaw’s outcome requires the capacity to

apply wisdom in the context of the situation and to then discern the right course of action in light of the specific circumstances.

Brett and Kate McKay make the case that the “exercise of practical wisdom comes from an individual’s freedom to deliberate the best course of action to take in a particular situation. As our society has become more complex, specialized and bureaucratic, the opportunity to consult one’s own conscience and exercise practical wisdom has increasingly been replaced with reliance on externally dictated rules, regulations, and standardized punishments and incentives.”

Albert Einstein aptly made the case that wisdom cannot be exercised without context when he

stated that “any fool can know. The point is to understand.”

The timeless quest to understand wisdom and the desire to put virtue into action is central to a life well-lived.

Practical wisdom

Over the course of my life, some of the most fulfilled people I have come to know are stockmen.

Cowboy culture

has yielded a multitude of writings that construct a library of practical

wisdom Aristotle would certainly have appreciated. Three verses from cowboy wisdom are my favorites.

When you lose, don’t lose the lesson. Wisdom is only attained via experience. Of course, this implies that both successful and failed choices will contribute to its attainment. The pursuit of practical wisdom implies the desire to create excellence. Certainly this should be the objective, but human beings make mistakes.

However, if the individual is willing to gain from loss, setbacks become powerful instruments of instruction. With this knowledge, the fear of failure can be subjugated to the knowledge that the road to wisdom requires taking the plunge without the certainty of success, but always the promise of growth.

When you give a personal lesson in meanness to a critter or to a person, don’t be surprised if they learn their lesson. Wisdom is not demeaning, and, because it is the truth, it does not require indoctrination to gain acceptance. Wisdom is an invitation to truth. When accompanied by the virtues of temperance and generosity, the combination produces behaviors and decisions that are just. A person who has practical wisdom is never

impoverished by the practice of cruelty to another.

If you’re riding ahead of the herd, take a look back every now and then to make sure it’s still following along. The practitioner of practical wisdom must understand the facts and the specifics of the situation and to make decisions with a 365-degree awareness of context.

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Aristotle was clear that practical wisdom requires having a distinct objective or focus; to possess a keen sense of perception to understand how to act in a specific scenario; to have a well-developed intellect honed by the pursuit and understanding of that which is true, noble and beautiful; to be deliberative before taking action, but ultimately to act.

Leaders focused on mere transactions will have followers easily dissuaded as conditions change, but leaders who possess and demonstrate wisdom will have the loyalty of their team and the capacity to nurture others to become leaders.

In the midst of chaos, the world seems devoid of wisdom — common sense by another name. Perhaps by leaning into the merit of Aristotle’s sensibilities and the teaching of generations of stockmen, we might find and live the truth. |

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.