

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Nurture creativity and innovation

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Too often our thinking about creativity is constrained by our notion that it is best practiced in

the realm of artistic pursuit, but has little to offer in the hard-nosed world of agriculture. We leave creativity to others — musicians, artists, entrepreneurs and the like.

Creativity is viewed as a gift reserved for a chosen few; not a skill to be developed widely. It's also viewed as a concept with little value in the world of blue-collar pursuits. We are more open to innovation, but tend to view innovative solutions as transactional — something to be purchased that we can somehow fold into the “way we do things.”

What would happen if we embraced the creative process and the development of innovative solutions intentionally, making time and space to unleash the creative/innovative spirit that is inherent in every human being?

What if we opened our minds to the arenas where this spirit can be applied, like grazing

systems, breeding systems, marketing, cattle handling and cattle health? Or, its application to human development, parenting, relationship development, learning, personal development and faith?

What if we allowed ourselves to wander into the world of artistic pursuit?

### A call to action

Tom Peters, the venerable organizational management and leadership thought leader, reminds us that “business isn't some disembodied bloodless enterprise. Profit is fine — a sign that the

customer honors the value of what we do. But ‘enterprise’ (a lovely word) is about heart. About beauty. It's about art. About people throwing themselves on the line. It's about passion and the selfless pursuit of an ideal.”

For those who choose to accept Peters' call to action, let me offer a five-factor model for how to grow creative and innovative capacity (see Fig. 1).

**Curiosity** is the dependent value. It is the womb from which new ideas and, ultimately, solutions are born. Nurturing imagination is as important as maintaining good health habits, yet it is a skill that tends to wane as we mature.

We can reignite the spark of curiosity by playing “What If?” We must pose questions on all sorts of issues and problems.

Curiosity is a strategic advantage for both individuals and organizations. Inquisitiveness about a broad number of topics ultimately creates the pathway to make unique connections between ideas,

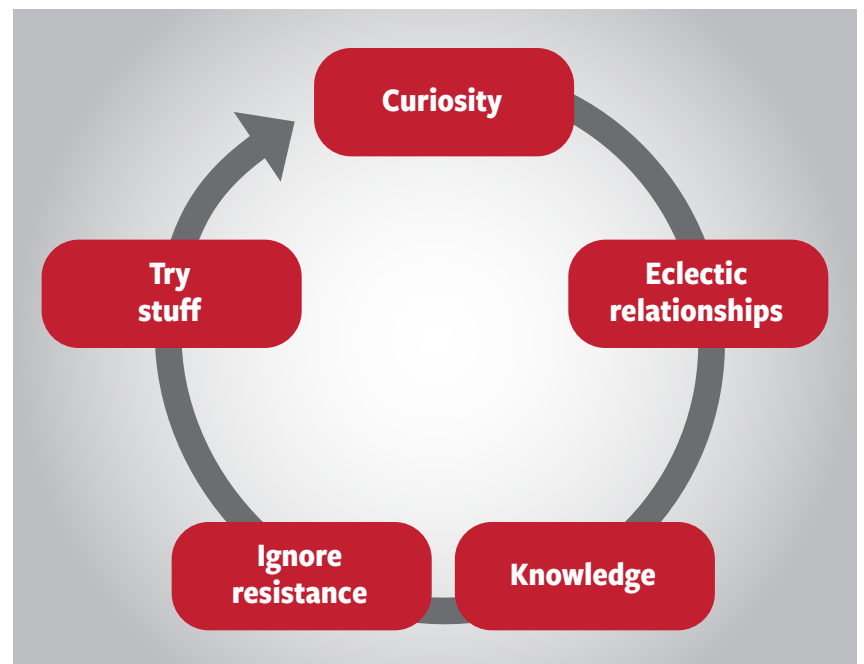
**What if we opened our minds to the arenas where this spirit can be applied, like grazing systems, breeding systems, marketing, cattle handling and cattle health?**

concepts and alternatives that lead to breakthrough solutions.

Creative thinking is a team sport and, as such, cultivating an **eclectic set of relationships** is necessary to nurture the imagination through conversations. Discussions with those who see the world through a unique lens widens our own view. When was the last time you had a great conversation with a musician, preacher, nurse, restaurateur, craftsman, skateboarder, rock climber or sailor?

Tom Peters makes the point, “If you aren't confused, then you aren't paying attention!”

Fig. 1: Five factors for creativity and innovation



To break through the confusion means engaging and listening to a host of viewpoints. In the process, blend local connections with the power of broadening your circle of influence through blogs, podcasts, TED talks and books.

**Knowledge** is the critical third factor — the active pursuit of real learning that develops or accesses expertise

beyond our current capabilities. The learning organization expects knowledge growth of every single member — leaders to interns — as a means to fill the fuel tank. Intentional facilitation of knowledge sharing then creates the combustion to put knowledge to work.

Every good and noble initiative in life will attract the forces of resistance — the new idea, developing a new skill, making time for creativity and innovation — and will only happen by **overcoming resistance**. Persistence and determination are the hallmarks of

creative thinkers and innovators. Doubt accompanies uncertainty, both internal and external influences will attempt to trick us into believing there is safety in the status quo.

Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us that “in every work of genius, we recognize our once-rejected thoughts.”

The final step is to **try stuff** — to play, to overcome fear of failure, to conduct rapid experimentation, and to embrace the reality that everything we want requires leaving the safety of the sidelines and getting in the game. Without action there is no possibility for creativity and innovation.

Do not wait for more time, for inspiration or permission — **BEGIN!**

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.