

Outside the Box: Into the wilderness

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The morning was breaking out of the darkness as small waves of the Missouri River methodically tapped against the sides of the long-bottom boats, vessels carefully crafted for the rigors of navigating against the current of the water

flowing downstream from the headwaters originating at the base of Montana's Rocky Mountains — a mountain range and geography that could not yet be imagined by those loading and securing the final provisions for the journey.



A sense of anticipation filled each member of the expedition as they conducted their assigned work without complaint. They labored in the mist of the morning, their boots damp from the dew-laden vegetation along the banks of the mighty river.

They were young, physically and mentally tough, and proficient in frontier skills — capabilities that would ultimately assure their survival and secure their success. There is no record of their individual thoughts as each stepped from the certain shore and cast their fate with the Corps of Discovery. Most assuredly, at least one of them must have hesitated, if only briefly, before stepping onto the wooden deck of the keel boat that would begin their journey that would span some 8,000 miles.

We can only wonder if they understood the magnitude of their mission and the hardships that lay ahead. Nonetheless, on May 14 in the year 1804, they cast off and set into motion the grandest adventure in the history of our young nation under the watchful gaze of Captain Meriwether Lewis.

Blazing trails

The Corps of Discovery entered into a wilderness that would prove to be breathtaking in its novelty. They would encounter new cultures, identify significant members of new species of plants and animals, and would travel without reliable maps and known landmarks for nearly all of the western journey. They attempted paths that were impassable and found themselves backtracking and beginning anew.

To complete their mission required the capacity to let go of what they knew and to embrace the power of observation in their new surroundings, to trust the judgment of both the established leaders, as well as the wisdom of those they met along the way.

Survival required collaboration, adaptation and nearly constant innovation. There were no playbooks, and what any one of them knew was far less important than their collective ability to learn.

Leadership mentality

The journey changed them, and none more so than the leaders who

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morphed their leadership style from command and control to a more cohesive approach.

Upon reaching the Pacific, a decision as to where to spend the final winter had to be made. They would convene the entire body of the Corps and take a vote — a process participated in by two members of the party who had no standing in an election conducted east of the Mississippi. They had forged bonds amongst themselves that have inspired generations and provide a template for leaders in contemporary times.

Canoeing the Mountains by Tod Bolsinger is an exceptional exploration of the lessons to be gleaned from the monumental expedition. While Bolsinger applies those lessons to the challenges of leading the modern church, his work provides deep insight for people who take up the yoke of leadership in any realm. The lessons are brilliant guideposts for those who have chosen to lead in the realm where land, livestock and human beings converge. The following are particularly pertinent:

- The world in front of you is nothing like the world behind you.
- No one will follow you off the map if they can't trust you on the map.
- In uncharted territory, adaptation is everything.
- You can't go it alone.
- The experience will change you and those around you.

These five concepts provide a foundation for those leading enterprises that comprise the beef industry in times of volatility and uncertainty. It can be difficult to find the path to the future. However, we have been blessed with history. There is much to be applied from the lessons of Lewis and Clark's epic journey, if only we have the courage to let go of the known and take the risk by getting in the boat and heading up river into the unknown of the wilderness.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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