

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Beneath the surface

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Gazing across a late-spring, high-country pasture as the sun warms the bay gelding beneath

my saddle is an experience to be savored. The smell of sage, pine and spruce adds dimension to the scene created by the emergence of fresh cool-season grasses, green leaves gathering on the branches of aspen groves, and the softening of the earth as it slips from winter's fleeing grasp.

Given the wonder of the moment, it would be easy to forget that this bounty originates from a complex ecosystem of soil, root structures and organisms hidden from sight beneath the surface. The mosaic of grasses, forbs and browse that will sustain our cattle, the elk, mule deer and a host of other wildlife originates from this vast underworld where microbes, nutrients and plant structures conduct their intricate dance.

My approach to systems has too often failed to include a deeper understanding of the processes beyond my immediate sight. It is the subsurface realm that offers opportunities for learning, innovation, enhanced management mastery, and the creation of lasting wealth.

### Root problems

As I turn the bay toward the ridge, it occurs to me that the growth of people and plants depends on a common truth — what we nurture beneath the surface is the foundation of fruitfulness. Just as a pasture may appear productive and healthy on the surface, a host of disruptions to the subsurface ecosystems may be setting the stage for diminished productivity. Management decisions that antagonize the root

system or impede the ability of nutrients and water to infiltrate the soil will undermine future performance. Human beings may outwardly signal the signs of success, but this is merely an illusion if personal habits and choices are eroding their character and wellness.

### Build character

Legendary coach John Wooden reminded us to “Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

Mindset, habits and affiliations may either enhance or erode character. A joyful life originates from an intentional approach to these internal metrics. Cultivating gratitude, curiosity and learning, resilience, service to others, approaching work with enthusiasm, trusted relationship building, and habits that support physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health create an internal ecosystem better able to sustain long-term value creation.

A healthy grassland ecosystem is the foundation upon which long-term cow-calf productivity depends. Healthy people are the foundation upon which strong families, enterprises and communities are built. In each case, our effect as managers and leaders is largely tied to whether we have a mindset of abundance or scarcity.

An abundant mindset recognizes a person's power in several areas:



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- 1. To choose our attitude.** Our approach to problems, challenges, opportunities and relationships has a substantial effect on outcomes. The abundant thinker seeks solutions, embraces both challenge and opportunity, and strives to bless others.
- 2. To maintain focus and intentionality** in the midst of chaos by virtue of acknowledging the hardships and challenges of life, but being resolute in hopefulness.
- 3. To accept the gift of wonder**

— to see beauty not only in what we can observe with the naked eye, but also that which we cannot experience directly in the moment. Just as what lies beneath the surface gives rise to landscapes worthy of

our amazement, so it is with the people in our lives.

- 4. To recognize that abundance thinking allows us to be more faithful caretakers** who

practice stewardship in search of leaving a meaningful legacy. In a world longing for abundance mindsets, the words of Tom Peters ring out in truth: “If you're a leader, your whole reason for living is to help human beings develop — to really develop people and make work a place that's energetic and exciting and a growth opportunity.”

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.