

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Pebbles

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



To be sure, not all pebbles are equal in their capacity to cause discomfort.

Some are sufficiently large and adorned with sharp points to assure an immediate response when they end up between our foot and the sole of our boot. In such a case, we stop, hurriedly remove our footwear and shake the offending bit of geology from its hiding place.

Yet, there are smaller, smoother bits of stone that, rather than causing anguish, elicit nearly imperceptible irritation. In these situations, our desire to keep walking to gain the next benchmark is so great that we don't stop. We choose motion rather than succumbing to low-level pain.

Management decisions are oftentimes driven by the rocks, pebbles, sand and grit in our boots.

### Sharp response

The sharpest stones are akin to dealing with unexpected crisis. The pain is intense and immediate. In these situations the problem is identified, remedial action is undertaken and, to the extent possible, preventative measures are implemented to reduce the risk of recurrence.

Machinery breakdowns, down fences and scours outbreaks are some of the sharp rocks we experience. In each case, the problem is clearly defined, and solutions are within reach. Certainly we want to avoid these sharp-edged experiences. However, we know

how to deal with them.

The more difficult challenges are the small, polished pebbles and even the grains of sand that slowly accumulate in the midst of our management system. Rather than producing significant and immediate pain, the initial effects are minor, ranging from nearly imperceptible to moderately irritating.

### Distractions

However, the degree of negative effects on the enterprise is not necessarily correlated to the degree of irritation. We might be irritated by seeing the neighbor driving a new pickup and pulling a shiny gooseneck trailer. That little bit of stone in our boot should be ignored. It has absolutely no effect on our business. However, if we become distracted to the point we purchase a new rig, then that little stone becomes a massive liability.

On the other hand, we may find a few grains of grit in our processing facility may, over time, create less-than-favorable outcomes. For example, we may get used to the gate that doesn't swing easily, the interruptions that slightly disrupt cattle flow through the alley and chute, and the cowboy who moves just a hair too fast.

The effect of any one of these elements is scarcely noticeable in the moment. However, through the course of a day, minor irritants accumulate and are manifested in more stress on people, cattle and facilities, resulting in lowered operational effectiveness and poorer performance.

### Don't ignore

Not all stones are tactical or operational. T.D. Jakes, a

motivational speaker and entrepreneur, reminds us one pebble not to ignore is psychological in nature. Past disappointments, unresolved conflict, perfectionism and unhealthy self-talk can become millstones that weigh us down and reduce the effect and joy of our lives.

We don't like facing these issues. Thus, these pebbles are often ignored, resulting in blisters and bruises that wound not only our own spirits, but also those of others.

### Sorting rocks

The trick is being able to sort the small irritants, ignoring some while confronting and resolving others. The ability to consistently apply discernment to decision-making is the difference between passable and exceptional performance.

If we seek continuous improvement in our businesses, we must acknowledge the pebbles in our boots. Still, we must treat them differentially so that we can learn to ignore some while giving focus to the most critical. |

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.