

Outside the Box

Establish limits, boundaries to safeguard system health.

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



Beef cattle managers work with a complex system of interlocking and supportive elements. Poor

condition or health in one area tends to undermine the health of other components and, ultimately, the entirety of the organization. A healthy beef cattle entity requires attention to the well-being of natural resources, cattle, people, finances, communities and relationships.

Costs related to nutrition are the largest cost category for the average cow-calf business. Good nutrition has its highest return on investment when expended in an inherently healthy system.

The least-effective strategy for focusing on health is to wait for symptoms of a problem to appear. In that situation the management strategy becomes focused on damage control, as well as the challenging process of searching for root causes of the problem.

When management is focused on unhealthy elements, decisions turn to cost control instead of value creation. When the goal is

to stop the bleeding, momentum is stilted, profits are more difficult to attain and stress builds within the system.

Stay on offense

How does one create a healthy enterprise, organization or system? While there is no off-the-shelf solution to assure health, there is a philosophy that will prove useful: Establish limits and boundaries.

Poor health of a system or its components is often the result of exceeding limits:

- ▶ Too many cattle in the alley and the gate breaks.
- ▶ Too much time on a pasture with too many cattle yields a less healthy grassland.
- ▶ Too many tasks leads to pushing the limits of human endurance.

There are four areas where limits and boundaries matter — time, timing, tasks and talent.

Time

Time is the great equalizer. Its allocation is one of the most important decisions one makes in one's professional and personal spheres. Time can be extended through better planning, recordkeeping and process management.

As an enterprise grows, the founder learns he

or she must bring on staff to buy more time to meet the increasing demands that spring from growth — taking the right amount of time to vaccinate correctly, to monitor pastures and to observe cattle regularly. Remember, slower is often faster when it comes to cattle handling. These are just a few time-based decisions that affect health.

Sooner or later, burning the candle at both ends leads to exhaustion — a precursor to poor health.

Timing

Timing affects health on multiple fronts. The timing and duration of grazing pressure, or establishing a fixed breeding season to assure calving is in sync with the ecosystem, are examples of choices that create boundaries leading to better enterprise health.

There is also an intersection of time, timing and task that, if not correctly bounded, will lead to an unhealthy and underperforming system.

Tasks

The right tasks done in the right order at the right time support health. Distress occurs when the trivial steal time and resourcing from the critical, or when time and timing are not managed in a coordinated manner.

The list of tasks to be performed must be prioritized so

that effort is given to those jobs that yield the highest merit.

Talent

Finally, there are limits to talent. When the boundaries of skill are ignored, the consequences are often undesirable. Mistakes lead to damaged equipment, injured cattle and people, and a number of other issues.

Training resolves many of the limits of talent, but people must also acknowledge when it's time to ask for help instead of getting a bigger hammer to solve the problem.

When a system lacks the proper allocation of time, timing, task and talent, tension is sure to result. When stress rises, the state of health declines, creating a vicious cycle that undermines performance and undercuts even the best nutritional plan.

Evaluating health from a systems perspective and establishing appropriate boundaries and limits related to time, timing, task and talent offers an approach to increase well-being across the full scope of the enterprise. **ABB**

Editor's note: In "Outside the Box," a regular 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.



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