



Outside the Box

by **TOM FIELD**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

Things left undone

One of the major dilemmas facing cattle managers is the ongoing process of defining a vision that helps our businesses to move forward while simultaneously measuring the performance of those activities, both done and undone, in previous years.

This dilemma is heightened by the inherent slowness of the beef production cycle. A heifer calf conceived on June 1 will not be born for nine months, will not breed for the first time until 12-14 months of age, and her first calf won't be born until an additional nine months have expired. That first calf won't enter the breeding herd or be harvested for at least an additional year. Thus, the impact of the breeding decision that creates a replacement female won't be measurable for a period of more than three years.

Certainly there are many opportunities to measure performance over that same duration of time, but cow-calf managers have to deal with the reality that they will make several more breeding decisions before they will have complete information on the success of

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those initial genetic and management decisions.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day there are a few questions that are critical to measuring the success of the cow-calf enterprise — do cows get pregnant with relatively low inputs, are the resulting calves born easily, do they survive, do they grow sufficiently, and do they bring in more income than their cost of production? In essence, any decision that caused the answer to the previous questions to drift closer to 'no' than 'yes' ought to be reconsidered, while those that moved the answer closer to the affirmative can generally be considered good choices.

Equally important to the process of

evaluating the effectiveness of choices that were made is considering the effects of things left undone. An example list of those things left undone might include the following:

- didn't follow up with the buyers of my calves;
- didn't buy any new equipment;
- didn't consider new market opportunities;
- didn't submit any forage samples for analysis;
- didn't evaluate health management plans with the herd veterinarian;
- didn't call the sales people back; or
- didn't have a discussion with family members and employees about the future of the ranch.

It is possible any one of the items left undone either had no effect on the business or even had a positive effect. However, each of these 'undone' tasks or processes may also have negatively affected the business.

Working in or on the business

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Working in the business involves technical capability — the skill sets of managing cattle and the basic processes of production to manage the day-to-day logistics of the enterprise. Frankly, these are abilities that are second-nature to most cattle producers and are typically the activities and functions that are most comfortable and familiar. Working in the business tends to dominate our time, particularly in the seasonally demanding periods of the year such as calving, weaning or haying.

However, it is the allocation of time to working on the business that generates the strategic advantages that come from planning, goal setting and networking. Evaluating the business from a long-term perspective may seem like a luxury, but left untended may align the enterprise for failure. Working on the business allocates the most limited of all resources — time — to activities such as professional development, employee

training, and comparing options to expand or diversify the business.

Tom Peters, world-renowned champion of innovation and organizational success, suggests that working on the business is a mix of dreaming, communicating (both within and outside the company), and implementing new ideas or processes. Peters asks the following questions to stimulate leaders of businesses to consider the importance of those tasks left undone:

"Have you ...

- Called a customer ... today?
- Thanked a frontline employee for a small act of helpfulness ... in the last three days?
- In the last week or month revised some estimate in the 'wrong' direction and apologized for making a lousy estimate? (Somehow you must publicly reward the telling of difficult truths.)
- Learned the names of the children of everyone who reports to you?
- In the last three days discussed something interesting, beyond your industry, that you ran across in a meeting, reading, etc?
- In the last 30 days examined in detail (hour by hour) your calendar to evaluate the degree to which 'time actually spent' mirrors your 'espoused priorities?'

Making time for working on the business will require handing over the responsibility for some of the "in the business" activities to employees or family members. The good news — with the right training they can handle it and might take the technical side of the business to new heights while you find time to evaluate the opportunities for your business to grow.

As 2008 unfolds, don't forget to spend time working "on" the business so you are in a position to take advantage of the emerging economic landscape.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd, composed of Angus and Hereford cattle. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program and a consultant for Cattle-Fax. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.