

Outside the Box: Mastery

by **TOM FIELD**



During my sophomore year of college, I was required to take a course that introduced agribusiness management principles and concepts. The instructor could most generously be described as “crusty.” That trait was exemplified in his first lecture, during which he explained in

clear terms, “If you are interested in this business because you like big belt buckles and black hats, then you are sure to fail.”

Given that I wore a big belt buckle and black hat, I’m sure I took offense to his admonishment and interpreted his words as a direct assault on cowboy culture.

Success in business requires that we understand human motivation and the deep need for people to have purpose, autonomy and the opportunity to pursue mastery.

In retrospect, he had no interest in buckaroo fashion; rather, he was reminding us that success in business required much more than a uniform. In many ways, that class began a lifetime fascination with trying to understand the factors that contribute to both individual and organizational success.

The challenges of global economic uncertainty and the rising level of risk associated with business are daunting. Yet, businesses succeed despite the economic climate, and history shows that many enterprises initiated in times of economic depression seem to be hardwired for long-term success.

What is it that ignites the level of passion required to build and sustain success? If one is to believe the “Occupy Wall Street” crowd, the answer lies in the pursuit of money and power. Take the same question and apply it to the beef business: Is it the pursuit of money and power that drives families to build seedstock, cow-calf, stocker and feeding enterprises, and to overcome obstacle after obstacle to keep those businesses alive? While economic motivation played a role, it is highly doubtful that economic gain alone provided sufficient incentive.

In his book *Drive — The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink makes a compelling case that the quest for mastery and the attainment of craftsmanship, coupled with purpose and autonomy, is the source of human excellence in activities ranging from athletics to the arts and to business. While money plays an important role in motivation, there comes a point at which additional dollars do not result in improved performance.

Purpose, the pursuit of mastery and autonomy are at the core of Olympic champions, entrepreneurs and certainly successful cattle producers. So how do these concepts apply to the business of raising cattle and enhancing our approach to farming and ranching?

Purpose

Try to imagine a life without purpose. I can’t imagine a worse fate. Purpose allows humans to connect to something greater than their self-interest and to tap into a rich source of motivation. Fortunately, the work of agricultural production provides great purpose — feeding people; providing natural resource stewardship; and improving the productivity of land, capital and labor all provide a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Purpose coupled with the intelligent application of time, talent

and resources yields substantial and extraordinary results. Without a strong sense of shared purpose, families would not have engaged in the slow and painstaking work required to transform a raw resource into a productive landscape. Business leaders who can tap into the deep need for humans to invest their energies into purposeful activities are more likely to build lasting enterprises.

Autonomy

Many of us are attracted to farm and ranch businesses because of the appeal of autonomy. The benefits of autonomy include having control over how we apply our time to the daily activities of agriculture.

Just as autonomy is important to owners and managers, the value of this attribute should not be ignored when working with employees. Developing systems that effectively provide autonomy coupled with accountability will improve job satisfaction, loyalty and performance.

Mastery

Pink makes the case that human desire to progressively improve in pursuit of mastery is governed by three laws — mind-set, pain and pursuit of the unattainable. People who have the mind-set that mastery is possible through effort and continuous learning have a much greater likelihood of developing mastery than those who believe that excellence is fixed at birth or mostly influenced by random forces outside of a person's control.

Mastery is not for the fainthearted, as it requires significant effort and, as such, pain must be accepted as a condition to mastery. Working with serious focus for extended periods of time is fundamental to attaining mastery.

Finally, while perfection is difficult, if not impossible, to reach, there is great satisfaction in its pursuit.

Each new calving season is a time when cattle producers are afforded a unique opportunity to witness the unveiling of the latest chapter in their life's work. Harvest brings another season of measuring the results of effort long since invested. These experiences provide evidence of our path toward mastery aligned with great purpose and underpinned by autonomy. Certainly financial incentives provide impetus to agricultural enterprises, but creating lasting value requires that we tap into influences far more meaningful. Success in business requires that we understand human motivation and the deep need for people to have purpose, autonomy and the opportunity to pursue mastery.

To view a short lesson from Daniel Pink, log on to www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc.

