

Outside the BOX: The next generation

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The long-term success of the beef business is solely dependent on the skill, perspective, and character of each ensuing generation that undertakes its stewardship. American society has been blessed by the vision of those who understood the value that would

be brought forth from investing in developing and mentoring successive generations of agricultural leaders. Such a vision created 4-H, FFA, the land-grant university system, and the myriad of events and programs focused on education.

From the earliest days of the American republic, the provision of education broadly across society was viewed as the best means to assuring freedom, stimulating economic growth, and building strong communities. The return on these investments has been significant, providing food security; an agricultural abundance that has fed not only our own, but millions overseas; as well as providing stability to both urban and rural communities. In light of these achievements, complacency is not an unexpected result.

The average age of agricultural producers continues to increase, the opportunity for neophytes to build farms and ranches from scratch is lessened by rising costs of land and resources, and fewer people seem to find sufficient personal fulfillment to commit their talents to a life on the land. Simultaneously, the beef industry has changed — technology has made production more efficient and less labor-intensive, economies of size and scale have driven consolidation, and the industry has evolved from a commodity orientation to a brand and value-driven production system. Taken in total, these trends demand that training the next generation will require innovation and a new approach.

What will it take for the next generation to take its place among those historic leaders and captains of industry? What skills, characteristics and experiences need to be acquired to enhance the possibilities of success? I hardly have all the answers, but based on conversations with some of the leading agricultural business leaders and educators, the following list is a decent place to start the discussion.

Skills and knowledge base:

- Strong foundational knowledge base (life sciences, mathematics, history, composition, civics and self expression through the arts)
- Depth of knowledge in management systems (strategic and tactical) and the ability to weigh both intended and unintended consequences of alternate actions
- Team building, leadership, conflict resolution and effective communication/advocacy
- Ability to solve problems by integrating information and knowledge from diverse fields
- Ability to critically evaluate and apply tools, technologies and data
- Supply chain knowledge — the beef business is complex and successful business arrangements require the ability to see the big picture

Personal characteristics:

- ▶ Willingness to take appropriate risks and to learn from mistakes and then move forward
- ▶ Dogged determination, competitive and strong work ethic
- ▶ Lifetime learner, curious, networked to a variety of perspectives and expertise
- ▶ Integrity, resolve and courage
- ▶ Confidence, accountability and ability to finish

Experiences:

- ▶ Significant work experience in a variety of settings working under diverse management styles
- ▶ International travel and study
- ▶ Team activities in a competitive environment
- ▶ Interaction with people outside of the industry and outside of one's comfort zone
- ▶ Opportunities to lead, to be evaluated, and to work under pressure such as time or resource constraints

The list doesn't conform particularly well to existing agricultural curricula and places more responsibility on individuals to work creatively to create their own unique educational and professional development. However, attainment of these goals prepares people to make effective decisions, balance both depth and breadth of knowledge, allocate resources, and to manage chaotic and complex systems. Agricultural entrepreneurs will not only manage conventional crops and livestock for profit but also energy development (biofuels, wind, etc.), recreational enterprises (wildlife, outdoor experiences, etc.), and ecological initiatives (conservation, habitat protection, etc.).

Agricultural opportunities are evolving, and as such the rules, assumptions and strategies that have been successful in the past must be reexamined and modified to fit contemporary and emerging business environments.

Letting go of approaches that served us well in the past will not be easy. Those industries and educational institutions that embrace this challenge are sure to thrive, while those that miss the target are sure to pay a heavy price in lost opportunities.

Educational systems must be adapted to better prepare the next generation for what is coming as opposed to what has been. Now is the time for agricultural leaders to define and articulate the capabilities anticipated for success and to engage with educational providers to create innovative programs designed to empower the next generation to claim the future.

