

Outside the BOX: Never quit?

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In cowboy culture, quitting is taboo. We live by the mottos of “never give up the ship” and “quitters never win.” On issues of character and core values, this deeply held commitment to perseverance and tenacity has served us well. Taken to an extreme, does the

“never quit” philosophy help or hurt?

As a starting point, take inventory of how many things have been added to the to-do list in the last two to three years and how many things were dropped. My bet is that the vast majority of us are exceptional at piling on the tasks

while not showing much aptitude for letting go. If time, talent and working capital were unlimited, then perhaps there would be very little need for this discussion.

However, time is a precious commodity. None of us are gifted with talent in all skills and competencies, and availability of working capital is often scarce. These three realities are sufficient evidence to reject the notion that any one of us, either individually or as an enterprise, can do it all. That said, perhaps we should quit trying.

The wrong stuff

Seth Godin, in his work titled “The Dip,” makes the case that human beings and organizations have to make two decisions if they want to attain world-class status — “quit the wrong stuff, and stick with the right stuff.” This, of course, is easier said than done. Consider how many times you have been coached to quit. It is rare to receive advice to quit, and when we do, it usually falls into the realm of stopping certain behaviors — such as quit wasting time or quit eating so much.

We receive far more coaching when it comes to developing new skills. While we have benefitted from the learn-by-doing approach, there are clear limits as to how far it will carry us. Consider all the things you try to tackle in a day and then determine how many of those activities generated revenue or reduced expenses. Upon careful analysis, there may be some activities that actually reduced revenue while adding to costs — these are a good place to start the quitting process.

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For example, what was the payoff on the six-hour stint in the shop trying to fix a piece of equipment with a limited set of tools and knowledge? How about the payoff on the chute welding job that required the processing crew to stop three times for repairs and more welding? Would the outfit be more profitable if it quit producing its own hay or replacement females, or if the most senior generation quit making all the decisions?

Godin makes the point that the returns we get from learning a new skill or starting a new enterprise tend to be moderately high in the first few months. For example, learning to weld may be exciting and the early outcomes of the effort produce returns that make it easy to keep

practicing. Eventually, as the tasks get tougher, less-than-desirable results are produced, and the fun of learning something new is replaced with the frustration of not yet having mastered the skill.

Godin calls this loss of achievement the dip and believes that it forces an important question. Am I willing to pay the price to become world class and thus lean harder into the challenge? Should I let go and reallocate time, energy and resources to those activities where both talent and commitment can be applied to generating truly exceptional results?

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What gets in the way of world-class performance are tasks that distract our attention, time and resources. Identifying and quitting these distracting activities is central to attaining long-term success. For example, spending years invested in improving welding skills only to find out that mastery will never be attained is an example of futility that should be avoided. Each of us has what Godin refers to as cul-de-sac skills, or those where the results of our efforts are capped by lack of talent, time, money, enthusiasm or commitment. Working harder and longer in cul-de-sac activities simply won't produce positive outcomes.

Quitting low-potential activities is not equivalent to the path of least resistance. In fact, quitting nonproductive tasks means that resources have been freed up to invest in the right stuff, which requires significant heavy lifting, learning and accepting pain in pursuit of a worthwhile long-term goal.

Quitting should never be an emotional decision made when the pain of getting through the dip is the highest. Instead, quitting or sticking is a strategic decision that recognizes the inevitable reality of the dip that lies ahead and what will be required to push through it. Greatness is possible when we discover the big difference between never quitting and learning when to stick with something of true long-term potential.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the Director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska.

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