

Outside the BOX: Confront reality

by **TOM FIELD**,
director of the
*Engler Agribusiness
Entrepreneurship
Program, University of
Nebraska-Lincoln*



What a difference a year makes. Changes in cattle prices have pressured enterprise leaders across the beef business.

The long run of sustained high prices insulated cow-calf producers from the doldrums experienced by the larger

economy for the past eight to 10 years.

Commodity prices will once again move upward in the future just as certainly as this will not be the last time that we will deal with market downturns.

However, our turn in the barrel has arrived, and the cattle business is going

to feel pressure. Our enterprises will find profitability more challenging to attain over the short run. This is not the time for wringing hands; instead, these times call for excellent leadership. Thus, it is valuable to take a few notes from the lessons learned by observing leaders in other industries that have struggled during the last decade.

Leadership sets tone

When things are tough, people will look to the leader of the organization. As such, the behavior, attitude and tone of the leader resonates with more force than during times of plenty. Sustained bad news in organizations often leads to pessimism, cynicism and ultimately to levels of frustration that manifest in damage to relationships and personal well-being. However, there are enterprises that avoid the downward spiral in performance and morale during tough market conditions, and the commonality of these trend busters is leadership.

Tough times cannot be overcome with blind optimism, but protecting hope while dealing with the facts can lead to organizations that become stronger, more effective, and better prepared for the future.

In times of organizational stress, leaders must thoughtfully focus on both the tasks at hand (goals, tactics, efficiencies, assessment and corrective action, etc.), as well as providing great stewardship of the people in the organization through communication, inspiration and support.

Great leaders provide vision

The great leader is able to not only improve processes, gain better control over critical aspects of the business and sharpen the organization's ability to serve its customers; but to also help people envision a brighter future through a unified commitment to a sense of service and purpose. By communicating clearly; celebrating wins; honoring people; and remaining calm, confident, patient and present, an effective leader can help build a culture of teamwork in spite of external obstacles.

A leader's own physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual fitness is critical to assure that she or he can attain self-control in the face of crisis, to help their people feel empowered, and to keep teammates focused on bringing their A-game while living their values, thus creating a force multiplier capable of winning against the odds. Rather than giving in to pity, high-performance teams tackle the challenges by seeking solutions, thinking outside the norm, and embracing learning and discovery.

In times of stress, leaders confront reality head-on by keeping facts at the forefront. Having access to meaningful information and data, even when it is painful, allows the leader to focus on

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critical areas of the business that can be immediately affected by decisive action.

Great leaders are able to check their egos and, as much as humanly possible, their emotions at the door while gathering input from a wide spectrum of people both internal and external to the enterprise. Perhaps most importantly, they refuse to play the blame game and are quick to counter anyone in the organization who does.

Avoid counterproductive behavior

Tough times can cause both individuals and organizations to withdraw, but this is counterproductive behavior that must be avoided. Not only must the leader avoid a bunker mentality, she or he must not allow their team to retreat to individual silos. Once an organization retreats into self-preservation mode born of fear and frustration, performance will most certainly decline in the short term. Furthermore, the long-term success of the company will be affected by the loss in cohesiveness and the erosion of trust between teammates.

Leaders must engage in meaningful communication to maintain their credibility and to grow the level of trust within the organization. Effective leaders from realms spanning business to the military place exceptional levels of importance on the need for communication in all conditions, but especially when times are tough.

While never hiding the truth of the situation, great leaders are able to maintain a rational and intentional level of hopefulness. They exude a quiet confidence and level of optimism as a constant reminder to their people that despite the hardships ahead, the team will prevail in the long run.

Organizations that not only survive during tough times but actually become more effective, resilient and competent, do so because their leaders were intentional, thoughtful and principled. Great leaders demonstrate dogged determination and a straightforward approach to both good and bad news. Above all else, in the midst of the hard work of righting the ship, they maintain their humanity, decency and kindness all the while demanding civility, discipline and a solutions mind-set from their team.



Editor's Note: Tom Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

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