

Outside the BOX: The youth movement

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Attending the Cattle Industry Convention in San Antonio with more than 8,100 other cattle enthusiasts was an experience that provided more than just a little food for thought. Youth were noticeably in attendance! Individual producers with more years

ahead of them than behind them, young families and university students elevated conversations, perspectives and attitudes.

However, the rising generation brings something far greater than youthful enthusiasm to the business — they

have a new set of skills and different expectations. Our next generation has a global view, a high comfort level choosing (and rejecting) technology, broad networks of relationships, and a decent handle on understanding emerging consumer markets.

Their expectations and aspirations for success will benefit our business in multiple ways. Certainly, they bring a fresh perspective to a number of issues — global trade, sustainability, beef marketing, communicating with supply chain partners and engaging consumers.

The next generation also represents a fundamental shift in perspective about work-life balance and gender roles. Make no mistake — the next generation is firmly rooted in the core values of free enterprise, hard work, commitment and stewardship. However, they plan to approach work and career in a manner that harmonizes with their relationships — family, friends and community. Lifestyle and quality of life are not at the periphery, but central to their choices. Furthermore, their attitude about gender opens the door for women to increasingly take on positions as managers and leaders at every level of the industry. Young families are increasingly interested in diversifying beyond agricultural production to invest in community-based businesses that better incorporate the talents of spouses, children and in-laws.

However, expecting the next generation to accept the reins of leadership without the benefit of mentoring and a thoughtful approach to preparing them for the challenge would be a fool's errand. It can be argued that the beef industry has a history of excellence in preparing young people to become better producers and managers. However, leadership requires a different set of skills, perspectives and experiences beyond those required to be a good producer.

Different dimensions

Whereas management is all about keeping the ship on its course, leadership is focused on sailing into uncharted waters. The development of leadership for the challenges that will confront the beef business in the next decade requires an investment into an integrated leadership development plan that goes far beyond contemporary efforts. Strategy, collaboration, innovation, creative problem solving and vision are essential to effective leadership. Developing these capabilities widely in the next generation ought to be of the highest priority.

Fulfillment and success are multi-dimensional experiences and not measured solely by economic outcomes. Certainly, profitability in both the short and long term matters, but it is not the sole variable

in the equation. Upcoming decision makers of the industry rarely center their conversations around just one variable of the beef business and spend little time stuck on a problem once it has been clearly defined. Instead, discussions have a decided “systems management” tone focused on solutions, creativity and innovation. Profitability and quality of life share center stage in conversations once reserved for discussions singularly centered on improved productivity.

Robin Faulkner and Mike Nichols asked a compelling question during their presentation to Cattlemen’s College®: In which of the following situations do you learn the most?

- a. Getting good results from doing it “right”
- b. Getting poor results from doing it “wrong”
- c. Getting good results from doing it “wrong”

Conventional wisdom has its place, but transformative solutions tend to come from those who ignore established paradigms in favor of new approaches borne from taking a different perspective, stepping away from historic models and asking better questions. There is much to be learned from those who are attaining desirable levels of performance, but going at the process from a different perspective and approach.

Increasingly, ranch families are finding great value in having the next generation leave home for at least four years to assure that fresh approaches and perspectives are developed. This strategy helps to break the cycle of “that’s how we do it here” while facilitating a deeper professional-development process.

Great opportunity arises from unexpected places and experiences. Kevin and Lydia Yon shared their story of facing the disappointment of losing employment due to the sale of a farm they were managing, recognizing that they would not be able to make a go of it in a familiar place, and ultimately building a business and a life in a new community.

Looking beyond the present state of affairs, sacrificing in the short run, reimagining undervalued assets, and seeing opportunity where others see only obstacles are principles that served previous generations and, as the Yons shared, still offers a path to prosperity for the next.

These are heady days in the cattle business, and the beef industry will be best served to take the lessons from San Antonio to stimulate creation of an action plan that prepares and positions the next generation to build an industry for the future.

