

Outside the BOX: The leader's choice

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Leadership on smooth waters and backed by favorable winds is certainly less challenging than sailing through stormy seas. However, in times of chaos and struggle, leadership makes all the difference. The heady days of historic high calf prices are fading into memory as

we confront the realities of today's situation. While uncomfortable, this is not a new experience for commodity producers.

A brief review of history reveals that commodity markets have never been able to sustain the highs; just as importantly,

price trough lows have never become fixed in time. Nonetheless, market-driven concerns create stress for nearly all the enterprises that comprise the beef industry.

History also tells us that, left to its own devices, frustration borne of stress yields unfavorable outcomes. Receding markets are often accompanied by a cacophony of calls for isolationist trade policies, more governmental involvement in markets, and the pursuit of litigation as the "fix." Far too often in times of stress, the conversation in the industry has been captured by emotion-driven reactions that make for good reading but little progress.

We also have a tendency to rely on a playbook designed for an industry that existed 20 years ago instead of the one that lies before us. My 40 years of experience in the beef business tells me that the blame game and depending on yesterday's game plan are fruitless when measured over the long haul.

In times of frustration and stress, the need for leadership is essential and that would certainly be the case today. Leadership is the process of guiding and influencing an organization of people into the tough work of creating and implementing solutions that are affordable, workable and yield desired results. Effective leaders recognize and acknowledge the facts as they exist, but are also aware that conditions are fluid and thus seek paths that allow agile decision-making.

When faced with difficulty, they do not fall into the trap of launching ill-advised search-and-destroy missions driven by emotion. Nor do they fall into the momentum-killing blame game. They understand that the energy of their organization must be protected and directed toward attaining results.

Rise above

Leaders build teams that collectively envision alternatives to the status quo; are able to focus time, talent and resources on the creation of value-creating solutions; see opportunities where others only see obstacles; and remain relentlessly hopeful and optimistic, while accepting the reality of tough decisions and the hardship that accompanies working through difficult times.

Leaders are decisive but actively seek information and perspective from sources both internal and external to their business. When faced with difficult choices, leaders also make time for deep reflection and are intentionally and methodically focused on their highest priority.

Leaders are able to deflect the cynic's apathy and the scorn of the dissidents. Effective leaders avoid the downward spiral of doom-and-gloom conversation in favor of directing their energy toward innovation and the pursuit of better pathways. Great leaders understand that shifting their

business model may be required, that processes and protocols that worked in the past may have to be abandoned.

However, they persist in their efforts to avoid short-term decisions or quick fixes that undermine productivity, profitability and flexibility in the future. When tough decisions have to be made, effective leaders act decisively and with humanity doing all in their power to minimize the damage and pain to people that may result.

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Most importantly, leadership is about intentional choices, behaviors and habits. As a result, leadership can and should be expected broadly across the industry and deep within the ranks of our businesses and organizations. Charisma is overrated. Substance matters far more than style — a lesson too easily forgotten in the age of social media, instant gratification and narcissism. These are not times for white-knight-, celebrity- or power-broker-style leaders. Rather, this is the age of the citizen — men and women who embrace accountability, demand the best of themselves, and who resolutely dedicate themselves to the pursuit of solutions.

Organizations, communities and nations focused on fundamental truths — where honor and integrity are at the heart of the culture, where constructive conversation and debate is allowed to flourish, and teams are centered on results — are the most resilient, healthy and successful.

These environments are not an accidental creation. Rather, they are developed by the consistent and determined application of intentional action. They are, in fact, a choice. Advice from leaders across the span of business centers on several fundamentals:

- be realistic,
- keep the team focused on building the road(s) forward,
- communicate honestly and in a timely manner,
- be a model of the values and principles upon which your organization is founded, and
- keep hope alive.

Which path will you and your team choose? The future will be shaped by your decisions.

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