



# Outside the Box

by **TOM FIELD**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

## Windshields and rearview mirrors

There is something uniquely attractive about the beginning of a new year — perhaps it is the opportunity for a fresh start, as if the turn of the calendar might wash away the shortcomings of the past. Perhaps it is a time of reflection that reminds us to consider personal or business changes that might improve the quality of our lives and of those around us, or a moment to enjoy the blessings and lessons of the past year.

Have you noticed the variety of perspectives that guide people's approach to the future? Some charge off with their eyes firmly fixed on the view through the windshield, while others seem transfixed on the scenes reflecting from the rearview mirror.

Neither of these approaches seems altogether prudent. Too little appreciation of history dooms us to the mistakes of the past; too much focus on the events and solutions of previous years yields inflexibility and lost opportunities. The ability to effectively set our course and then

successfully navigate the unforeseen twists and turns of the future requires the dual awareness that comes from looking forward while learning from the past.

### The winds of change

Nearly every facet of the cattle industry is in the throes of change, buffeted by the tides of uncertainty, while its anchor strains against the stresses of modern life. Yet, we find ourselves in one of the most profitable periods in the history of the beef business, with consumer demand rising, export markets reopening, and innovation and creativity applied to every nook and cranny of the industry.

Indeed, it is times like these that make us wonder whether the old Irish saying, "May you live in interesting times," is a blessing or a curse. The successful cattle producer will balance the benefits of past experience and the rich traditions of history with the ability to put form to dreams and reality to vision.

### Learn from history

I think success depends on our ability to focus on both the windshield and the rearview mirror. Gut instinct tells me the split should be 80:20, with the majority of our time focused on what lies in front of us.

The rearview of 2005 should remind us that consumers spent a record \$71 billion on beef — almost double the levels of 1987. Cow-calf producers enjoyed another year of profitability as cattle prices reached record highs.

Herd rebuilding was initiated in earnest this past year and will continue into the foreseeable future. These trends point to excellent profit margins for cow-calf producers in 2006, but they also signal the turn in the cattle cycle that ultimately leads to lower prices as production and inventory rise. In other words, the rearview mirror is reminding us to plan for a changing landscape in the future. Now would be a good time to prepare for the proverbial "rainy day."

Each of us affects the success of our own business and also the success of the broader beef industry that emerges from our individual and collective efforts. It is valuable to take a moment to balance our viewpoint of what is to come and what has passed, to consider what traits and characteristics allowed success in the past and which may be required to prosper in the future. While it would be far more simple to attempt to detail what skills, protocols and technologies ought to be obtained, allow me to suggest the following characteristics as fundamental to the future of our industry — hope, courage, relentless tenacity and servanthood.

### Fundamentals for the future

The greatest trait of the American spirit is hope. Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote, "It has never been, and never will be, easy work! But the road that is built in hope is more pleasant to the

traveler than the road built in despair."

Calving season provides us with an annual reminder of the true nature of hope — that wonderful opportunity to witness firsthand the fruition of dreams and plans. While American society struggles with the effects of instant gratification, the cattle producer is constantly reminded that, in the end, success is the result of relentless tenacity in the face of challenge.

"There are but two roads that lead

to an important goal and to the doing of great things: strength and perseverance. Strength is the lot of but a few privileged men; but austere perseverance, harsh and continuous, may be employed by the smallest of us and rarely fails of its purpose, for its silent power grows irresistibly greater with time," wrote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in a competitive world is to stay focused on our role as servants to others. When self-interest dominates our thinking, we step out onto the

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slippery slope that ultimately leads to dissatisfaction and frustration. Servanthood uplifts those who see success in our efforts on behalf of others. In the words of Seth Parker, "If you have saved a lot of heartaches for other folks, you are a pretty rich man."

At the end of the day, a fulfilled life, healthy families and communities, and strong rural industries depend on our cumulative ability to have the courage to act. Eleanor Roosevelt understood that all good outcomes eventually reside in action when she said, "When you have decided what you believe, what you feel must be done, have the courage to stand and be counted."

As 2006 unfolds before us, may we have the good sense to use the past as a benchmark, but not a millstone, and the fortitude to forge ahead toward the fulfillment of our greatest visions.