

Mentors & Masterminds

For young producers starting out, this business strategist emphasizes the importance of networking.

by **KINDRA GORDON,**
field editor

Asking for help ranks as the most important lesson John Spence says he has learned about achieving success. Spence is a business strategist who has worked with Fortune 500 clients, has authored four books, and has twice been named one of the Top 100 Business Thought Leaders in America. However, Spence has not always been at the top of the success pyramid.

Growing up in Miami as the son of an affluent lawyer, Spence acknowledges he “grew up spoiled.” When he went to college, Spence had a 1.6 GPA after three semesters and was kicked out — in spite of the fact that his dad was on the board of directors for the college and had a building named in his honor on campus.

It was a wake-up call for the young Spence. He restarted his college education at a community college, and discovered the power in networking, learning and asking for help. With that foundation, Spence went on to graduate first in his class at a competitive law school and built the successful career he has today.

Advice for others

Today, as Spence shares advice with others striving to achieve success in business, he says, “There is no shame in asking for help. You can learn from books or online, you have access to the most brilliant people in the world. Make that part of your plan for success.”

How can you get others to change?

When asked how the incoming generation on a ranch might provoke the older generation to consider new ideas and changes, John Spence offered this advice:

“I use articles or information in books to try to get people started down the path to consider change. First, I might give out an article for employees (or family members) to read, and have the group discuss it the following week. Maybe it’s a topic related to leadership, or succession planning or new technology. The goal is to foster discussion,” he says.

After a few months of this, he suggests bringing up the topic of

Along with this, he advises pairing up with a mentor or starting a “mastermind” group that shares information with one another. Spence used this tactic while he was in college, creating “mastermind” study groups for each of his classes. This allowed information to be shared and learned.

Spence emphasizes that it is important to surround yourself with the right people. He explains, “You become what you focus on and like the people you spend time with. So it is critical that you focus on the right stuff. Take control of what you focus on and who you spend time with.”

Good guidelines

To find a valued mentor, Spence suggests identifying what specific skill you want to learn, and then seek out people who have been in the business 10-20 years and have the knowledge and experience to help you.

“They may be in your family or could be outside the family,” notes Spence.

He also emphasizes that a mentoring relationship should only last 6-12 months. “Time is precious,” says Spence, advising you to be cognizant of others’ time, as well as your own. If you do not feel you are gaining new knowledge from the relationship, move on, he suggests.

In mentor relationships that do work out, at the end of the arrangement, Spence advises asking the mentor to suggest three new names who may fill the role of mentor to continue your learning journey.

Additionally, he urges finding a way to give back to a mentor.

“Ask, ‘What can I teach you?’ Perhaps you can help them with technology or another facet of their business,” he says.

For young leaders and producers, Spence is also an advocate of establishing mastermind groups — either via teleconference, Skype or, when possible, in person. He notes that these groups

foster the sharing of ideas and knowledge that can help bolster success as much as a one-on-one mentorship.

When new information is gained, Spence emphasizes that you must also be willing to apply it. “There is often a gap in learning and applying. You must be disciplined about applying what you’ve learned. That’s how you become better.”

Another tip Spence offers is that of

setting priorities. He says, “There is no such thing as time management ... only priority management. You’ve got to figure out what you value, and have the courage to say no to the things that do not match your values.”

Additionally, he says, “Use a system to organize ideas. The reason a lot of people are poor at managing their time is because they use lists or keep everything in their

head. Put your ideas [or goals and tasks] in a secure place you trust, then let it go out of your brain. This allows you to better focus on the things that add value.”

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changes that might relate directly to the ranch business. “You use the articles to bring up a topic, and then it’s not coming from you directly.”

He continues, “You’ve got to be able to help them understand that the industry is changing, and we have to change or we won’t survive. Outside articles can help give data that supports that message, and by bringing it from a third-party source, it doesn’t pit family member against family member.”