

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Gadgets

Leaders who invest in developing a mindset of innovation will outperform those focused on the next, shiny gadget.

The number of channels on our cable service offering “new and improved” outnumber the sports offering; access today’s weather by asking your cellphone, or start your day with an Alan Jackson song by simply making the request to the little device sitting on the kitchen counter.

In the back seat of a ranch truck you’ll find all sorts of tools and gadgets. Walking through a trade show at an industry event exposes you to a number of new devices and formulations.

I am an advocate for the right technology, tools and infrastructure applied in the right way at the right time. However, by themselves, the volume of slick technologies and equipment cannot make us more innovative, profitable or productive. Indeed, if we submit to the acquisition of too many gadgets, we can become poorer in mind, spirit and bank account. When we think of innovation as a concept tied to things we miss an important truth. Innovation is a mind-set, a way of approaching challenges and opportunities founded on curiosity and creativity.

Innovative behavior is subdued in most people by the time they reach adulthood. Social scientists have demonstrated that first- and second-graders can outperform their

adult counterparts when tasked with building the highest possible structure using boxed spaghetti and marshmallows. Children seem to be better able to fend off the loss of creative capacity. As we turn more readily to internet searches or phone apps for nearly every human activity, we risk our own development of innovative thinking. Ranchers are just as vulnerable to the loss of creativity. Without an active plan of attack, no one is immune to the loss of innovative behavior.

Another erroneous assumption about innovation is that it equates to any novel change or alteration. Many inventive approaches should not be adopted or should await further testing for consideration in the future. At its core, innovation should produce measurable value for the user. With this in mind, is it possible to create a more innovative culture in your own work and within your organization?

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, *Breaking Down the Barriers to Innovation*, the authors suggest that there are five fundamental elements common to organizations as well as people who work and lead with innovation.

- Deeply held belief that there is a better way, accompanied by a willingness to question the status quo.

- High engagement, both within the organization and beyond.
- Nearly obsessive commitment to understand the customer’s problems, challenges and aspirations.
- Devotion to experimentation, iteration and pivoting while remaining free from the fear of failure.
- Open to calculated risk and actively seeking input from both advocates and skeptics.

What gets in the way of these five elements becoming commonplace in the ranching business? Groupthink and self-doubt are perhaps the greatest barriers. While blessed with a rich history, ranching is also saddled with the challenge of overcoming “we’ve always done it this way” syndrome. Static strategies ultimately erode the ability of any industry to find a better way.

Leaders of enterprises who invest their energy and resources into building a mind-set of innovation will outperform their contemporaries who are overly focused on finding solutions in the form of the next shiny gadget. **AJ**

Editor’s note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.