

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Bridges, Moats and Trolls

Building bridges is a powerful metaphor that has captured the imagination of storytellers, engineers, entrepreneurs and adventurers.

Building bridges whether made of steel or theoretical concept is work undertaken by those who see opportunity, a better way forward and a more promising future.

The bridge builder seeks to connect ideas, concepts and resources. However, the world is not composed of only bridge builders.

There are two other characters that tend to be found in the vicinity of a bridge — moat diggers and trolls. The bridge builder can ill afford to ignore either one.

The moat digger operates from fear, desiring to create a formidable barrier that will protect the castle. The moat digger will go so far as to add alligators to his watery trench to further ward off uninvited guests.

Taken in the context of new ideas, adaptive learning and innovation, the moat builder is committed to the status quo and seeks to protect and consolidate the holdings already attained. The moat digger operates with a belief that power is best preserved by living within the confines of a castle's walls surrounded by a barrier that provides the illusion of safety.

Let's not forget the trolls — those creatures or mindsets that work to prevent the traveler from crossing the bridge or attempt to extract

a felonious toll for passage. How many times does the person with the new idea find themselves unable to cross the bridge leading to the implementation of that idea by self-doubt or fear? Too often the trolls of cynicism, envy and resentment prevent passage or diminish the enthusiasm and momentum from the innovator. Trolls also come in the form of regulatory barriers, bureaucracy and power mongers.

So which of these characters do we play — bridge builder, moat digger or troll? Leaders can be found cut from each of these cloths. However, only one approach creates sustainable excellence. The world is a chaotic, uncertain and volatile environment but always filled with opportunity, so long as we are able to connect the dots, build passageways that move us forward and embrace creative problem-solving.

Hanging on the wall of my office, “The Bridge Builder” serves as a constant reminder of the virtue of stewardship. Composed as a tribute to her father, Will Allen Dromgoole published “The Bridge Builder” in 1900. Miss Will, as she was known to her friends, describes the journey of a seasoned man who encounters a chasm filled with turbulent waters. After navigating across the river,

he stops to build a bridge that will span the dangerous waterway. As he labors, another traveler pauses to question the utility of a man nearing the end of life spending his final days building a bridge that he will not use. The old man's response explains the motivation for his efforts:

“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,

*“There followed after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.*

*This chasm that has been as naught
to me*

*To that fair-haired youth may a
pitfall be;*

*He, too, must cross in the twilight
dim;*

*Good friend, I am building this
bridge for him!”*

We are occasionally stymied by the moats and confronted by trolls. However, when we lean into the example of those who built the bridges, we find the role models to be exemplified and the strength to persist. Let us be inspired by the words of Miss Will to become a generation of bridge builders. **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.