

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The Replacements

Creating a job description to describe the replacement heifers we seek for our ranch would include expectations such as demonstrating productivity for a decade or more; coming to work with a cooperative attitude; having needs aligned with the resources and environment of our enterprise; a strong commitment to nurturing and growing offspring; and a respect for infrastructure, cowboys and fences.

We have high expectations and willingly invest resources in the selection and development process of replacement heifers because of the remarkable effects on the success of our cow herd.

Given the long bovine biological cycle, the heifer selection process carries the inherent requirement for patience, as the results of our efforts won't be realized in the short term.

Consider when the initial sort is made at weaning, very little is known about the effectiveness of our choices until a year has passed and the full extent of selection decisions is played out over an even longer time period. If increasing longevity is a goal, the results play out over a decade or longer — hardly a game for those seeking instant gratification.

Identifying and developing the next generation of talent for the cow herd is critical. If our process is successful, each subsequent new crop is at least as good as or better than the mature cows they replace.

We rightly pour time and attention into finding the replacements for

the cow herd. Still, what about the process of finding and developing the next generation of human talent?

Identifying the next leader

As managers and owners, how much effort do we put into the process of replacing ourselves? My perception is most ranchers are a lot more comfortable with developing a strong succession plan for the cow herd than they are in addressing the process of selecting and preparing the next generation of humans who will lead their organization.

In a recent workshop with board chairmen of local cooperatives, we generated a list of questions existing leadership should be asking about

Figure 1: Leadership Growth and Development



the future. At the top of the list — “Are we effectively identifying and developing the next generation of leaders at all levels of our organization?”

In the resulting discussion, it became clear that this was a subject with recognized importance but not supported by intentional and

sustained action in most cases.

Leadership development is the most future-focused activity we can undertake. Regardless of the size and scope of an organization, the deliberate growth of current leaders as well as the development of their eventual replacements will determine success. An actionable model (Fig. 1) to develop into a higher-performing leader includes four focal points — continuously learning, accepting coaching, developing relationships and nurturing the next generation of leaders.

Developing into an exceptional leader requires an intentional commitment to ongoing learning. This helps to develop skills for what

the business needs today, but also to prepare for the future needs of the organization. The growth mindset leader also seeks coaching and has the courage and humility to gain a deeper understanding of what they do well and what areas need improvement and change.

Leadership cannot function effectively with a silo mindset. Thus, it is essential to develop a network that connects us to the community beyond our specific enterprise as a means to find talent, perspective and alternative solutions.

Finally, the greatest legacy we create is not the business we build, but rather the people we mentor into authentic leaders poised to take our

enterprises to new heights. The next generation of replacement females will affect the cow herd for a decade; the next generation of leadership will affect our enterprises for a lifetime.

Are your replacements ready? 

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.

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