

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

The Face of Experience

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to address a large audience of farmers in a region that had been devastated by bad weather and flooding in 2019.

Gazing intently across rows of faces — men and women who had battled the fury of nature’s wrath — I was humbled by the resolve and superhuman toughness looking back at me. Spanning multiple generations and representing a multitude of stories, it occurred to me they had chosen a more difficult path. They had not shied from the hardships, disappointments and challenges.

I wondered what they thought of a Super Bowl beer commercial that glibly described a “better way of farming” — a marketing ploy driven by those without callouses on their hands, dirt beneath their fingernails or the weight of uncertainty that characterizes production agriculture. How often had I and others in the well-meaning cadre of university specialists, government agencies and input sellers talked at them offering simple solutions to complex problems and one-size-fits-all approaches; without ever pausing to consider the enormous power of collective wisdom represented in that room.

In light of the generation turnover that is facing agriculture; we are facing a crisis in the loss of working knowledge if the wisdom gained from decades on the land is not transferred to the next generation of owners and managers. In no way am I suggesting

that production agriculture should be immune from change and innovation; but we undervalue native knowledge gained from spending a lifetime working in a specific ecosystem.

Honoring wisdom

Part of the problem lies in the reluctance of many senior farmers and ranchers to share the depth of their knowledge. In some cases the old adage of “talk low, talk slow and never say too much” is a well-honed art form. Nonetheless, what valuation would be placed on the knowledge and experience of an entire generation of practitioners of any profession? Imagine the effect on society from losing 30 years of medical knowledge or engineering expertise. Such a loss would be viewed as an intellectual and societal crisis. Yet, we live in a time when politicians, consumer goods companies driven by a vision no longer than the next quarterly report, and social media pundits naively suggest that agriculture is no more complicated than pushing the buttons on an elevator.

Agriculture must morph, adapt and pivot in search of ways to optimize productivity, profitability and resource health. However the process requires not only acknowledging, but honoring the wisdom of agriculture’s

practitioners. Stewardship is not born solely of philosophy, but also of practice developed through years of trial and error, adaptive learning and the power of observation.

While one can study aviation, the theory of propulsion and the mechanics of aerodynamics — a pilot isn’t created by being tethered to the ground. Ultimately, a pilot is created by the guiding hand of experience leading the novice into the realities of flight. No one in their right mind would suggest that aviation would be better off without the influence of experienced pilots.

If we aspire to a world without hunger, to healthy landscapes and thriving ecosystems, we have to find the way forward by transferring the knowledge and experience of the current generation of “keepers” — those who hold the knowledge born of active engagement, sharpened by the seasons, tempered through trial by fire and who have walked the talk. Integrating the wisdom of the “keepers” with emerging innovation assures progress. However, woe to the society that turns away from the face of experience. [A](#)

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