

OUTSIDE THE BOX



by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The big four

It's time the beef industry's young guns think more broadly when it comes to talent acquisition and data mining.

The captain of the ship cannot focus solely on the mast and deck. Attention to the horizon and awareness of changing conditions provide insight for making course corrections that keep the ship from the dangers of a rocky shore. Effective leaders also continuously evaluate their assumptions to avoid the fate of the RMS Titanic, a ship driven to the bottom by the assumption that it was unsinkable.

Four macro issues are bearing down on the beef industry and each are questions of access to often-overlooked resources — talent, global markets, data and supply chains.

Talent

Agriculture's greatest vulnerability is access to talent. For generations, a strong preference for people with direct experience in farming or ranching has existed. There are too few people in the talent pool as defined by our old standards, and competition for that talent is growing.

While agricultural skills continue to be important, the industry needs to broaden its access to innovation, software development, systems engineering, logistics management, analytical capacity and systems integration. To secure access to the appropriate skills, leaders have several options:

1. Actively recruit, train and promote women from the traditional talent pool.
2. Develop a system to attract and grow people with agricultural skills on a global scale.
3. Build a system of recruitment to attract people without agricultural backgrounds.

Global markets

The next generation of leaders must develop a collaborative approach bringing the efforts of individual companies, industry associations and educational leaders to create a strategy to assure that agriculture has the capacity to attract and retain excellent talent.

Wealth creation depends on revenue generating capability. Growing revenue will require access to global markets as the fastest growing numbers of consumers, especially middle-class, reside outside our borders. Of course, contemporary leadership needs to find a path forward to sustain healthy agricultural trade on a global basis.

Data

Data fuels innovations in IT. Large corporate players recognized the value early on and have been building effective strategies to collect, analyze and utilize the power of data.

Producers must work more diligently to protect their access and ownership of the data they collect as a means to capture the economic advantages of the resource. It is no longer enough to just fence pastures; creating a fence around data is equally imperative. Access to data is critical to maintain management flexibility in the future.

Supply chains

Supply chains acknowledge consumer demand attributes, translate them into market signals and facilitate communication to key decision makers. While product characteristics dominated the discussion in the past, today production processes have elbowed their way onto the stage.

Developing a deep understanding of the business models along the supply chain with a keen understanding of customer discovery will be skills the next generation of leaders must develop.

tfield2@unl.edu

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.