

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

The Partner

Technology, smart machines, artificial intelligence and the generations of advancements to come will certainly offer value and even solutions. However, these devices and systems are all woefully inadequate as partners.

Just as machines will never be capable of crafting stories that move the human spirit, they will never attain the esteemed level of partnership. True partnerships, either personal or professional, depend on the very essence of humanity and call upon its members to deliver the highest level of character and integrity.

A partnership reaches into rarified air in the realm of human relationships — a connection that takes on a level of depth that is truly unique. Partners share a vision that is framed by clarity and purpose. When disagreements occur, as they most certainly will, partners are capable of building a solution without the loss of trust.

Four elements

There are four deeply interrelated elements that characterize partnerships — trust, accountability, commitment to the pull, plus shared vision and values. Comparable to the cornerstones of exceptional structures; these four characteristics are each powerful in their own right.

However, a partnership can only be sustained when these elements have been systematically woven together.

Trust and accountability are the bookends of partnership. The manner in which trust is given depends on the previous experiences and current expectations of each partner. The establishment of trust between people is ultimately a rational choice to suspend doubt about the motives of one another.


Sustaining trust requires accountability, the ability to forgive honest mistakes and the capacity for discernment in times of stress in lieu of emotional reactions. Accountability requires the ability to hold frank, even uncomfortable, conversations; being able to reach agreement about performance metrics; and commitment to the belief that delivering on a promise is the shared responsibility of each party. Once accountability is in place then each partner moves forward freed from worries about disloyalty.

Worthy endeavors share one common characteristic — the work will be challenging. Thus, each partner must be committed to the pull. Partners understand there are no short cuts, no way to cheat the system, and no returns without investment. They are fully aware that the law of the farm is firmly in

place — there is no harvest without preparation, investment, and the diligent execution of responsibilities.

Finally, partnership depends on shared vision and values. Partners must agree upon the direction of the shared enterprise and then be diligent in reaffirming the horizon being sought. Agreement as to the mission assures the partnership applies talent, resources and effort in harmony.

However, it is critical that creative conflict be in place. Once the outcomes are defined, healthy debate and discussion as to how to attain them usually leads to a higher level of performance. While each partnership will have a unique set of shared values, great partners tend to be resolute that grit, sweat equity and hope are important to success.

Great partnerships are not happenstance; rather, they are the result of thoughtful and dedicated effort. Ultimately, partnerships work best when each of the members is most focused on what they give instead of what they receive. 

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.