

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## The Gift

*Work ethic is a gift to help this generation achieve excellence.*

My parents, grandparents and community of origin gave me a wonderful gift. However, when I first unwrapped that gift, it appeared to be more burden than prize. Their offering was modeled for my generation in both word and deed. Furthermore, that gift came bearing an expectation of commitment to its promise. They called it work ethic.

These were tough, tenacious people who had known hardship, but who had never lost their vision for a better future, could not imagine getting something for nothing and embraced challenge head-on.

My parents and grandparents had all started or grown businesses ranging from ranching to retail to hospitality. They were deeply committed citizens who invested in youth development, local charities, county government and a host of initiatives designed to make our community a better place to live, work and play. While desiring the best for their children, they were also resolute in their expectation that hard work, sacrifice and giving your best were requirements, not options.

Five mantras were consistently delivered to us:

- No deposits — no returns!
- What you sow is what you will reap!
- Give \$1 worth of effort for \$1 worth of pay!

- Anything worth having is worth working for!
- Honor your commitments — finish what you start and keep your promises!

To be sure, the wisdom wasn't automatically accepted — I tested these principles with occasional disobedience and youthful rebellion. However, in my own personal and professional experience, these five concepts have proven to be true — a lesson learned both in acceptance and avoidance of their veracity.

In the examination of influential human beings across a multitude of circumstances, professions and cultures, a strong work ethic is an absolute common thread.

However, work ethic alone is insufficient to assure a fulfilling and meaningful life. It must be woven together with humility, temperance, courage, generosity, sacrifice, justice and honesty.

Virtues are the bricks that construct character. When embodied, virtues provide the compass heading and the guardrails to enable principled decision-making, create trust and accountability, and earn rights via responsible commitment and action.

To veer away from these principles is to assure our efforts will fall short no matter how hard we work. Without virtue, individuals seek shortcuts, break their promises,

become self-centered, focus on external affirmation and ignore discernment in favor of outrage. Those who choose blame and victimhood rather than the growth available through sacrifice and discipline find emptiness rather than meaning.

An examination of contemporary times provides extensive evidence as to the consequences of failing to follow true north principles. Benjamin Franklin was emphatic in his belief that “only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”

We have lost our way. Our culture of division and blame is the result of lost focus on the foundations of our remarkable nation. Neither side of the political spectrum is immune from this debilitating disease. We should well heed the words of Thomas Jefferson who stated, “In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.”

Rebuilding our focus on individual and collective excellence will not be an easy path, but we have a road map marked by the signposts of sacrifice, honor, civility and engaged citizenship. This is the gift of our ancestors, if only we have the wisdom to accept. **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.*