

Agility Is Necessary for Success

Navigating the current market requires quick thinking and decision-making.

by *Kindra Gordon, field editor*

If there's one word that sums up today's marketplace, it's fast. Ag production inputs and market prices are now seeing as much price change in a week — or even a day — as they used to in a whole year.

For cattle producers who are accustomed to following their seasonal routine, these fast changes and the volatility in the market can be stressful and overwhelming. Advice from two books I recently read offers a way to combat the stress: The answer is agility.

Defined as “the ability to think and draw conclusions quickly; intellectual acuity,” agility is the strategy employed by the military — where life and death situations require planning, preparation, leadership and quick decision-making.

Advice from a general

Retired four-star Army general and former Secretary of State Colin Powell released his new book this summer titled: *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership*. In it, Powell outlines several strategies for success.

Foremost, he says, is adopting a winning attitude. Powell emphasizes that you must always believe you are going to win. He calls disappointments, failure and setbacks a normal part of the business — and life — cycle. As a result, he says, a leader must constantly say, “We have a problem; let's go and get it,” and then have passion and conviction in doing so.

Powell's second strategy is to build a team.

Says Powell, “Make sure people know what the job is and give them the resources they need to get it done.” In the process you must also build trust, which can be achieved

by being faithful to your purpose, equipping people for that purpose and treating them with respect and consideration. He says an important message to share is “I couldn't do this without you.”

Additionally, Powell emphasizes the importance of training people for their job.

“In the military, we don't hire from the outside,” he says. “If we want a battalion commander, we have to bring in a lieutenant 12 years earlier.”

Along with that, Powell suggests you manage your talent, noting that everyone has different experiences, skills and personalities. As a result, he says, “I try to practice what I call situational leadership. I adjust my style, within limits, to the strengths and weaknesses of my subordinates so that I understand what they can and can't do.”

Most importantly, Powell advises that you plan, then act decisively. He explains, “My view has always been that before you say ‘Let's go bomb somebody,’ you think it through.” He says it is important to consider if there is another way to solve the problem or achieve the objective. If there isn't, you have to act, he concludes.

Think like a fighter pilot

In that vein of “thinking things through,” as business managers learn to navigate chaos (or volatility), which has now become the norm, author Mike Richardson suggests that managers take a cue from fighter pilots who train in extreme environments. In his book *Wheelspin: The Agile Executive's Manifesto*, Richardson points out that air-to-air combat is chaotic,

and anything can happen. In 20 seconds you can either kill or be killed.

To prepare for that chaotic environment, Richardson explains that fighter pilots are trained in something called the OODA Loop, which stands for:

Observe: Observe what is going on around us, using all the senses, to sustain our situational awareness.

Orient: Interpret what we are observing — what just happened, what's happening now, and what's likely to happen next.

Decide: In that context, decide what our options are and what we are going to do.

Act: Act on those decisions.

Richardson says this process is a never-ending loop, with the steps happening over and over again. As pilots train in this sequence, the OODA Loop process becomes more intuitive and instinctive. They begin to anticipate where that other pilot is going and have the agility to make quick decisions — giving them an advantage during the chaos.

This process can be applied to today's market conditions. No one has the crystal ball to pinpoint exact market reactions. The key is to constantly observe, orient, decide and act — and continuously repeat those steps. Richardson suggests that with this systematic approach to decision-making, you will be able to adapt to market signals with the agility of a fighter pilot and, most importantly, keep your business viable. AJ

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Beware of being wrong

In the opening pages of *Wheelspin*, author Mike Richardson shares the story of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 from 1972. It is nighttime, and the aircraft is at 2,000 feet on final approach into Miami International Airport. The captain pushes the lever to put the landing gears down and expects three green lights to confirm they are down and locked. Instead, only two green lights come on and one fails to illuminate.

The captain puts the plane on autopilot, and all three crewmembers in the cockpit begin to focus on fixing the light bulb. In the process, one of them nudged the yoke, which disengaged the autopilot from its altitude-hold mode. The trio is so focused on fixing the light bulb — and because it is dark they can't see the horizon as a reference point — that they do not monitor the flight instruments and notice that the plane has begun a gradual descent.

According to the cockpit voice recorder, at 150 feet one of the crew spotted the altimeter and in disbelief questioned, “We're still at two thousand feet, right?” A few seconds later, the aircraft crashed traveling at 227 miles per hour. More than half of the passengers and crew — 101 people — died.

Richardson says the tragic lesson from this true story is a vivid depiction of what can happen when we “put blinders on” and begin to focus on an assumption that may not be correct.

I think most of us can admit to making the mistake of having our “blinders” on. We become so focused on one assumption, which turns out to be wrong, that other mistakes are caused as a result.

We see this happen frequently in agriculture, particularly with regard to marketing. Cattlemen may have a plan and stick with it, even though the market signals are telling them something else. Making an assumption and sticking with it is akin to focusing on fixing the light bulb while the plane begins to descend, suggests Richardson. No one wants that for his or her business.

Instead, implementing a process where you observe, orient, decide and act — as Richardson explains as the OODA loop — you can anticipate all the possible scenarios and plan for each one. As a result, managers are prepared to quickly adapt as market conditions change — and difficult decisions do not need to be made in the heat of the moment.