



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, University of Nebraska

## Entrepreneurship

*Entrepreneurship — a word made for Wheel of Fortune®, Scrabble® and spellcheck. The business pundits and bloggers hold it out as the holy grail of economic renewal. Stir the pot long enough and definitions involving phrases such as “enterprise start-up,” “risk acceptance,” “innovation,” and a host of others will come boiling up. My view is simpler — entrepreneurship is the process of putting self-reliance and accountability into action.*

### Do or die

The entrepreneur recognizes that there is faint hope of success from waiting for someone else to solve the problem at hand. The entrepreneur is inherently on the impatient side of the scale, has little interest in bureaucratic processes and timelines, and is willing to shoulder the consequences for taking action. Entrepreneurs find a role not only in starting their own businesses, but also in taking innovative approaches within mature companies and organizations.

Moving forward is their preferred state of being, and they just can't imagine putting their fate in someone else's hands. Dave Nichols, Nichols Farms, had it right when he said, “Columbus didn't stand around arguing whether or not the world was flat or round. He got in the boat.”

A common misperception is that entrepreneurship belongs solely to the virtual world of high-tech computing, smartphone apps and electronic devices. While one can't help but be impressed by the immense success of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, they are not necessarily the model for successful entrepreneurship. Tom Peters has studied business entities of all shapes and sizes, and most corporate leaders have tapped into his incredible experience and knowledge. Peters writes that “farmers have a lot to teach us.”

He continues, “I live among rural Vermonters much of the time. They can do a million things. The average ‘hick’ in my neck of the woods is a crafty, multiskilled networker/trader/entrepreneur. Many of my neighbors are degreeless and diplomaless, but they could outwit the

average corporate manager without raising a sweat.”

Peters, rightfully so, has recognized the tremendous value of common sense, hard work and daily problem solving characterized by his rural New England neighbors.

My urban friends often marvel at the challenges faced by farmers and ranchers and wonder how we survive in the midst of changing economic, weather and market conditions; multi-faceted risk; and being geographically removed from the many conveniences that they see as essential to daily life. The answer to their question can be complex; but, in truth, it boils down to the reality that in the visceral world of small business,

the old adage of “do or die” is ever-present. Under these conditions, human beings make a fundamental choice — the assumption of risk is acceptable in exchange for the opportunity to succeed or fail in pursuit of a deeply held passion.

### Jeffersonian philosophy

Entrepreneurship is the embodiment of the Jeffersonian philosophy nurtured at Monticello and tested in the creation of a new nation founded on the timeless truth that independence and freedom are attained when people choose the path of self-reliance and accountability. Thomas Jefferson advocated vigorously for a community and system of governance that valued the ability of citizens to build the future one individual, one enterprise and one community at a time.

In 1786 he wrote that, “if all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves

to work, to emancipate the minds of their subjects from their present ignorance and prejudices, and that as they now zealously endeavor to the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground, which our common people are now setting out.”

He also knew that excessive intervention by the government would most certainly undercut entrepreneurial capacity, and he warned future generations when he wrote, “if we can prevent the government from wasting the labors of the people, under the pretense of taking care of them, they must become happy.”

The American economy has been shaped by innovation driven into action with the entrepreneurial zeal born of the “can do” attitude. The beef industry is an example of the impact of entrepreneurial thinking applied to the production of food under a variety of geographic constraints, utilizing resources creatively, and applying human imagination and innovation at every step of the process. Driving from our home in Nebraska to our ranch in Colorado provides the opportunity to view an amazingly productive landscape, communities of immense promise, and the results arising from the application of labor, creativity and common sense. In that space, I am confident that democracy still lives.

It is again time to unleash the power of entrepreneurship and to passionately prepare the next generation of entrepreneurs for the difficult but rewarding road that lies ahead. America is at its best when each citizen shoulders the load, chooses the path of self-determination and, in the process, builds families, businesses and communities. It's do or die time!

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