



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of producer education, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Accountability

The year 2009 has largely been a scary experience — economic uncertainty, political insanity, a government growing beyond the boundaries of the founding fathers' vision, and a culture that seems to increasingly value dependence over independence are grave sources of concern. These are times that make it difficult to feel in control and when it is easier to be lured by the siren's song that urges us to turn away from personal accountability. The solution for me is a return to the lessons of my youth.

'Cowboy up'

My father's style would not have been appreciated by the television pundits or our contemporary politicians, who seem to believe that if we all just sit back and let the government take care of things, it will all be better soon. The traits that won approval in his eyes were hard work; personal accountability; fair play; taking losses like a man, but learning from them while never accepting defeat; and avoiding the mental trap of confusing the terms fair and equal.

In tough times, my brothers and I learned to 'cowboy up' and focus on the task at hand. Despite high expectations, there were only a couple of ways to disappoint him — quitting, not being accountable for pulling as hard or harder than the rest of the team and giving in to fear.

As my brothers and I work to keep our ranch business afloat in the midst of chaos, I think my Dad would push us to focus in the following areas for the short-term:

1. Re-examine the approach to marketing cows and open heifers. In light of the multiple dairy herd reduction programs, decisions about timing marketing of cull breeding stock may have to be made beyond historic price trend analysis. As the dairy and pork industries work through their respective efforts to reduce herd size, total protein supplies are growing and, thus, pressuring prices downward. Gauging market trends against availability and cost of feed will be required to determine whether or not to bet on the price of market cows tracking with the historical trends of price improvement in February and early March.
2. Consider herd expansion. With the reasonably good pasture conditions in most of the U.S. and a better-than-average hay crop, it is worth considering whether or not this is a year to begin moving into

an expansion phase. Many experts point to the growing demand for protein on a global basis in the next several decades despite the short-term pressures due to economic uncertainty. It comes down to whether our mind-set is leaning toward economic recovery or delayed returns to profitability. Given the advantages of scale plus all demographic indicators pointing to short beef supplies, as well as an improving feed availability scenario, this may well be the time to initiate herd expansion.

3. Swap high-quality hay for higher volumes of lower-quality forage. At the end of the day, profitability results from the ability to control costs, create inventory turnover and to take advantage of market opportunities. Hay yields have been relatively high, but in many regions the quality of early cuttings was negatively affected by excessive rain. As a result, for some producers the opportunity may exist to sell high-quality hay into the horse and dairy market while trading those dollars for a higher volume of 'cow' hay.
4. Keep conversations alive with employees, lenders, buyers, and neighbors. In times of economic uncertainty it is critical to have clear communication with key partners, vendors, suppliers and buyers. Transparency coupled with access to key information is central to making good decisions under duress. While we may be tempted to shoot from the hip, these are hardly the times for emulating the riverboat gambler.
5. Stay committed to the foundational value of creating quality. It takes most ranches

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years of concerted effort and dedication to create consistent quality and value. Diminishing that quality takes far less time, and cutting the wrong sets of corners is almost sure to undermine the ability of the enterprise to deliver quality.

6. Get engaged in our role as citizens. The will of the American people has always been our greatest resource and has helped this nation withstand both domestic and international challenges. Citizenship is an active process and passivity will only lead to more hardship. My Dad spent some 20 years as a servant to his community as a county commissioner. He taught us that the first and foremost responsibility of an elected official was to respect their constituents and to deliver the best possible solutions.

At the end of the day, we must reclaim personal accountability as the first responsibility of citizenship. The words of Abraham Lincoln were appropriate in his day, and are equally on the mark in ours. As leaders of businesses, communities and families, we must claim the high ground of Lincoln's vision.

"You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich.

"You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong.

"You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift.

"You cannot lift the wage earner up by pulling the wage payer down.

"You cannot further the brotherhood of man by inciting class hatred.

"You cannot build character and courage by taking away people's initiative and independence.

"You cannot help people permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves."

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