



Outside the Box

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

Leading with character

It never occurred to me that it was possible to be simultaneously optimistic and yet greatly concerned about the future. The worries arise not so much from the problems that face both the nation and the beef industry, but rather our responses to them. Tom Peters wrote in a recent blog that "the problem is never the problem. The response to the problem invariably becomes the problem."

Unintended consequences

At first glance, his view seems to be irrational, but with deeper examination it becomes clear that Peters is sounding a warning about the inescapable law of unintended consequences, which rears its ugly head when individuals or organizations respond to problems by either trying to cover up their own mistakes, shifting blame to others, or failing to understand the intermediate and long-term effects of emotional, reactionary decisions.

The U.S. economy and the American agricultural system are fraught with challenge and a host of problems — all of which will require a disciplined and reasoned approach if they are to be solved. Yet, some leaders who have been entrusted to find long-term solutions have resorted to rhetoric, playing the blame game, and seeking short-term gains as opposed to guiding us through the struggle and pain that must be confronted if the problems are to be resolved.

As a result, "solutions" are proposed that either miss the real problem altogether or engage our precious time and resources in petty battles driven by narrow personal agendas and personality conflicts instead of moving forward to build the wealth that creates jobs and opportunities.

Great leaders sort through the chaos and confusion by staying focused on their core principles and the task at hand. They avoid the pitfall described by Stephen Covey in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: "as individuals, groups and businesses, we're often so busy cutting through the undergrowth we don't even realize we're in the wrong jungle."

Every sign and indicator suggests that our nation and industry are at a crossroads. Limited resources and economic conditions heighten the need for our focus to stay on point and our energy to be spent on the right issues while making choices based on reason and integrity instead of emotion and ego.

Driven by character or emotion

In *Developing the Leader Within You*, John Maxwell compared the traits of character (integrity)-driven and emotion-driven people:

Character-driven people:

- do the right thing first and foremost — even in difficult times;
- are commitment driven;
- make principle-based decisions;
- ask, "What are my responsibilities?";
- stay focused on the desired outcome and sustain their effort when problems arise; and
- make good decisions that create opportunity.

Emotion-driven people:

- focus on their feelings and struggle with doing the right thing when they aren't feeling their best;
- are convenience-driven;
- make popular decisions that feed their egos;
- ask, "What are my rights?";
- behave like a windsock when problems arise; and
- make decisions that ultimately limit opportunity.

In times of crisis and uncertainty, history shows that emotion-driven leaders often gain followers who are attracted to passionate messengers who offer simple solutions, place the blame on some outside group or individual, and create a sense of victimization in their followers. These leaders are very effective in creating reactionary responses that ultimately lead to Tom Peters' hypothesis that the "response becomes the problem." History has also shown that these leaders rarely create sustainable solutions and typically fall from grace when their egocentric motivation emerges.

Characteristics of good leaders

Research results from leading business schools in the United States show that the most successful leaders in a variety of environments are rarely flamboyant or of "star quality." Instead, they possess characteristics that allow them to remain focused on creating an environment of accountability, helping their organization accept the sacrifices and pain of working through challenges while maintaining focus on the mission, and staying true to principles of integrity.

Successful leaders also recognize when mistakes are made, are accountable for them, and remain committed to the principles of continuous improvement. They are able to set their egos aside, and they seek solutions as opposed to power.

Professionals who study leadership and organizational effectiveness are also learning that the leaders who are most able to produce sustainable performance in their organizations rarely make snap decisions; they listen intently and prefer an environment where creative discourse and debate is alive and well, and they are able to maintain a focus on short, intermediate and long-term perspectives simultaneously. Effective leaders ask a lot of questions, understand the complexity and intricacies of their business or industry, and have identified those critical elements where their influence will have the greatest impact.

These are indeed tough times that provide plenty of fuel to cause worry and concern. Yet, the seeds of optimism are viable even in these troubling times because the answer yet remains in our hands — the citizens. If we hold our leaders accountable and at the same time develop the depth of knowledge upon which to make rational rather than emotional choices at the ballot box, we can provide the next generation a healthy nation and the opportunity to succeed in the beef business.

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