



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## What are you afraid of?

*Good questions have become increasingly fascinating, while my skepticism has grown when encountering the clever answer packaged as a 15-second sound bite that attempts to deal quickly with complex issues. Slogans (political and otherwise), bumper stickers and catchy tweets just don't carry the freight, while a thoughtful question compels the hard but fruitful work of pondering possibilities, examining options and searching for solutions.*

### Hard questions

So it goes with business — regardless of industry, size or customer. Enterprise is all about asking the right questions. There are, of course, a multitude of valuable questions for entrepreneurs, but there is one I consider to be the mother of all questions for those who seek to build an enterprise: “What are you afraid of?”

Confronting this question at a surface level usually results in answers involving snakes, spiders or sharks. However, with a deeper examination of fear, a host of new concerns may arise — change, failure, embarrassment, being the center of attention and high expectations are often at the core. These are the fears that act as paralytic agents that prevent people from acknowledging and acting on their highest aspirations.

In these cases, fear acts as a barrier, perhaps a crutch, and certainly as a deterrent to action. As a result, creative ideas are pigeonholed, potential new enterprises fade away, and dreams go on the back burner never to be realized. Fear can be costly because it can rob people of their ability to try, fail, start again, and to ultimately prevail in the pursuit of their goals and objectives. In truth, fear stands between us and the opportunity to reach our greatest potential, and to take on the challenges we were born to tackle.

### Fear can be overcome

Fear is oftentimes mistaken as a state of being — a fact of nature. This is incorrect. Fear is an emotion, a perception, and thus can be altered. The first step is to identify the source of fear and perhaps the circumstances or experiences from which it arose. Bob Taylor, the legendary agricultural educator, advised his students to recognize that success wasn't permanent nor was failure fatal. As good as his advice was for university graduates, it was even better counsel for entrepreneurs.

Fear coupled with uncertainty acts as a substantial barrier to business start-ups, enterprise growth and innovation. For example, making a cold call can be a stressful activity. What is the cause of unease? For many, the root cause of unease in a sales scenario is the fear of rejection. The fear of “no” is even more difficult when people align their self-worth with the response that comes from the other party.

In reality, sales professionals tell us that getting to one “yes” is preceded by six “no, thanks” responses. The successful salesperson stays focused on building relationships, is intent on the desired outcome, and accepts the reality that the only way to get to that outcome is to overcome their aversion to rejection. Imagine what would have

happened if basketball great Michael Jordan had let being cut from his high-school team stand in the way of getting to yes?

### Start a conversation

Communication skills and salesmanship are not innate to certain personality types. They can be developed, enhanced and perfected via concerted effort. In the realm of merchandising seedstock, sales grow when people are able to pick up the phone, start a conversation or build a relationship.

Think about the last time you walked down a row of cattle at a show or a field day. How many times did someone try to engage you in a conversation? My experience is that it happens far too rarely, and thus results in thousands of lost opportunities to make connections and sales.

Successful innovators overcome the pressure of established routines, accepted protocols and “that's the way we do things around here” thinking. If innovators had let the fear of looking silly or of going against conventional wisdom derail their vision, then we would still be sending mail via the Pony Express and messages via smoke signals and drumbeats. In the chaos of today's markets, a more important question than “Is it too weird?” might be “Is it weird enough?”

Fear also gets in the way of pricing. When a product delivers value by solving a problem or meeting a buyer's need, then it should be priced accordingly, but in too many cases entrepreneurs let their fear and uncertainty create a pricing model that undervalues their products and services.

Fear and uncertainty can be overcome by facing them head-on and understanding their root cause. Free enterprise works because the vision of what might be is more powerful than the fear that stands between the entrepreneur and the realization of the vision. Take the time to examine what fears stand in your way; it might just unleash your potential.

EMAIL: [tfield2@unl.edu](mailto:tfield2@unl.edu)

**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.

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