



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Fitness

Fitness! There are three distinct definitions of fitness — suitability to a specific task or role, the ability of an organism to survive and reproduce in a specific environment, and the condition of being physically fit and healthy. How might these three disparate meanings have relevance to a cow-calf enterprise?

Key performance categories

For starters, measuring and improving fitness is not a new concept to ranching, cow-calf production and landscape management. The fitness of cattle, people and business models has long been recognized as important in one form or another. However, a series of independent fitness metrics are not nearly as valuable as a systematic and integrated approach to determining fitness. The overall fitness of a ranch is determined by a series of key results categories.

For the sake of argument, most enterprises will find that the key performance categories include financials, cattle, people, landscapes, organizational culture and market demand. The vast majority of information and advice available to producers tends to focus on enterprise profitability, cattle productivity and market signals. All three are indeed important. However, the fitness of landscapes, organizational culture and people are far more critical to the long-term longevity and well-being of the total enterprise.

One of the great joys of ranching and farming is being immersed in the complexity of a landscape — a system so amazingly diverse and interwoven that it takes at least one human lifetime just to begin to

understand it. With the shared wisdom of multiple generations, it is possible to make decisions that work within the constraints of a set of natural resources to generate financial wealth, agricultural productivity, and enhance the fitness or well-being of the resources. However, the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation is most effective if measures of fitness are developed.

Soil fitness

Fitness measures of a pasture or range might include total daily nutrient (TDN) production, level of noxious plant invasion, stability of streambanks or a comparison of the actual plant mix compared to the composition of the desired plant community. However, the aforementioned indicators are all based on aboveground perspectives. There is another perspective of the grass resource that lies below ground at the soil level. Metrics that help assess the fitness of soil include organic matter and infiltration rate.

Organic matter is a critical soil component created by incorporation of both aboveground and root materials to create a stable structure. The benefits of increased organic matter in soil includes improved water-holding capacity, increased nutrient

supply, especially in the form of nitrogen, and better soil structure, which helps improve water infiltration while reducing erosion. Water infiltration measures the ability of the soil to hold water. Soils with acceptable infiltration rates are less susceptible to erosion and are more efficient at holding water to improve root access and thus plant growth.

Just as the fitness of soil structure is critical to the stability and productivity of grassland, the culture or way of conducting business in community with others impacts the stability and productivity of the total enterprise. Tom Walter, owner of Tasty Catering in Chicago, recently recognized as one of *Forbes* magazine's top 25 small businesses, is considered an authority on building effective company culture.

Culture foundation

He says culture is built on a clearly defined and agreed upon set of values that drive human behavior. These values set the stage for determining organizational vision, which then leads to establishment of a focused mission. Determining the fitness level of a culture is both art and science. The science involves using engagement-assessment tools that can help quantify employee satisfaction, commitment and excitement relative to the company. The art form involves developing levels of empathy and vulnerability that create the deep kind of connections that lead to more functional and productive teams.

Organizational culture is not happy talk nor is it frivolous; instead, highly functional organizational cultures create profits, innovations and reduced employee turnover with increased levels of employee engagement. Healthy cultures are characterized by respect, a sense that ownership is shared across the organization and a commitment to creating solutions.

Nearly eight years ago, a former student greeted me at a conference with these words "Doc, you are getting fat." To be sure, there may be more polite approaches, but those words were *exactly* what I needed to hear. I had been ignoring my own fitness levels. Those words led to a deep introspective examination of my habits, attitudes and behaviors.

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Having a fit business, improving the health of our landscape, enhancing the well-being of our cattle, having strong relationships with my family and team, and striving to have our products fit customer needs were all areas of fitness that received a lot of attention. However, the one thing I had failed to do was to be a good steward of my life.

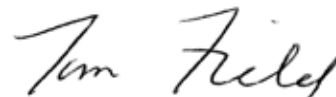
It took a systematic approach that included changing my eating behaviors (beef remained a key element of my diet),

developing a workout regime, improving my spiritual life, which improved my emotional state of being, finding accountability partners, and being willing to be coached.

As the song goes, “I’m a work in progress,” but today I am in a better state of fitness. Because my fitness has improved, I am better able to focus and implement plans that lead to improved fitness in all the other areas that are important to my businesses, relationships and quality of life.

Take a step back, assess fitness of the key

results areas of your business and life, and then build and execute a plan to create continuous improvement. It will change your life!



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