



Outside the Box

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

Builders

Builders are a different breed of cat. These folks see opportunity, take action, adapt to roadblocks and changing circumstances, persist at nearly Herculean levels, and create relationships long before they pour a yard of concrete, drive a nail or connect a power line. Builders tackle the work of creating new enterprises, empowering other people, and generating more vibrant communities.

Vitality

When the status quo isn't acceptable, they don't waste much time gnashing their teeth and raging against the establishment. Rather, they create alternate routes to more desired outcomes and then invest their energy and accept the risk that comes with taking the road so eloquently described by Frost as "less traveled."

Most of us have the great pleasure of living and working in rural places. We value the wonderful attributes that rural communities provide to our families, businesses, sense of well-being and relationships.

However, I am intrigued by the variation in success of communities, enterprises and even individuals. Why is one community energized, while 10 miles down the road another is in a state of slow decline? Why does one business thrive, while another just across the street struggles? What are the commonalities of those families and individuals who inspire and invest in the success of their communities? Why do leaders emerge in some situations, while in other organizations leadership seems far too scarce?

A success story

In a conversation with leaders and entrepreneurs in Ord, Neb., recently, four basic themes were woven into the success stories of individuals, families, enterprises and organizations — intentional creation of culture, developing allies, persistence, and adaptive response to obstacles and change. Ord's vitality defies conventional logic — the population of some 2,000 is far removed from an interstate highway, no dominant employer exists, and it doesn't offer a dominant tourist attraction. Nonetheless,

Ord is characterized by a sense of hope coupled with evidence everywhere that people are committed to building something special. There is something to be learned from their story.

Attaining success alone is challenging, but sustaining success requires not only effort,

Attaining success alone is challenging, but sustaining success requires not only effort, but an intentional and deliberate effort to create a culture of excellence.

but an intentional and deliberate effort to create a culture of excellence. Intentionality works when a shared vision is built and community resources of talent, time, passion and treasure are inventoried and leveraged to make detectable progress toward the vision.

Great culture results when individuals intentionally frame their attitudes and conversations around shared goals while embracing the process and hard work required for individuals and teams to reach pinnacle

performance. While consistently high-performing teams and organizations may appear effortless, it is because we are only seeing the action above the waterline. Beneath the veneer of success lies a commitment to intentional behavior and decision-making. Intentional organizations embrace the challenges because their eye is on the prize.

Embrace change

Builders understand that progress requires at least some element of change and that change will have impacts both real and perceived. They also acknowledge that even the possibility of change yields resistance with diverse reactions (both rational and irrational) sure to be part of the process. Furthermore, even with relatively benign change some will cling to the status quo. The builder recognizes that there are no quick

fixes and that the time and effort invested in communicating, transparently sharing information, and creating a broad base of allies pays off in the long run. The first step is finding common ground, no matter how small the territory, and then taking action to build from shared space.

Persistence is an absolute characteristic of the builder, for only through long-term commitment can lasting value be created. Obstacles, naysayers and critics ought to be an assumed part of the landscape of nearly every situation. Thus, the builder must demonstrate persistence in dealing with those forces that conspire to slow or derail progress. When a spirit of persistence is coupled with an intentional approach to creating the future, a culture of abundance emerges as the result of applying dedicated, steady effort against a challenge. When such an approach becomes widespread within a community, the game changes.

Flexibility and the ability to adapt to change were viewed as critical behaviors by the entrepreneurs and community leaders of Ord. They were passionate in their belief that from every problem, each shift in market or technology, or unexpected circumstance, an opportunity would emerge. Whether it was pivoting a business from biodiesel production to food-grade sunflower oil, finding new markets for specialized popcorn when Styrofoam packing peanuts fell out of favor due to environmental concerns, or addressing leadership needs by building a leadership program focused on the development of individual skills across a broad spectrum of the community, the people of Ord live a sense of innovation and creativity driven by a willingness to be flexible.

Why care about builders? Because the beef industry depends on the power of builders in each frame of life's story — individuals, enterprises and communities. Unleashing the spirit of the builder grows the opportunity for all of us to create lasting wealth and value.

EMAIL: 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.