



Outside the Box

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

The cavalry isn't coming

We live in a culture where the expectation to be rescued increasingly overrides accountability and self-reliance. This phenomenon affects individuals, families, businesses and even entire communities. We catch ourselves hoping that the government will fix the problem, that somehow the situation will magically correct itself, or, worst of all, bickering over who or what is to blame for our predicament. "Waiting on the cavalry" is too often an excuse for inaction, inertia or a passive acceptance of the status quo.

The tipping point

In almost every arena of life there are pivotal moments for individuals, enterprises and organizations that determine whether they will climb the value ladder or slide into insignificance. For those spurred to action, the deciding factor in setting the stage for success is the realization that no one is coming to the rescue. In these scenarios, ordinary people roll up their sleeves and take matters into their own hands. Hesitancy is replaced by focused and thoughtful decision-making, the proverbial ball starts "rolling" to generate momentum, sustained effort is applied, and thus the enterprise, career or community that appeared to be dead in the water is reinvigorated.

However, it isn't necessary for a crisis to drive action. There is an inspired alternative that is driven by asking questions that center the organization or individual on the most critical factors that drive success. Peter Drucker, whose expertise in leadership and management is perhaps without parallel, recommends driving performance by asking the following questions:

- What is the mission?
- Who is the customer?
- What does the customer value?
- What are the current results?
- What is the plan?

Commit to the mission

The Center for Association Leadership identified an additional set of commitments that differentiated the truly outstanding organizations from those running with or lagging behind the pack — commitment to purpose, reliance on data analysis and feedback, and the will to act.

Too often these questions and commitments receive only cursory attention as leadership spends its time focused on

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putting out fires with attention and resources captured by what Stephen Covey described as "the trivial many instead of the critical few." However, outstanding organizations make the investment of time and talent in searching for answers.

Why does it matter that the mission, customer and value are clearly defined? Mostly because the answers to those questions protect us from the consequences of short-term, crisis-driven choices. Mission-driven organizations never subjugate their core purpose to solve short-term financial problems by serving the wrong customers or by taking on partners that drive the organization further from outcomes truly valued by customers.

Yes, you read correctly — there are customers and partners that we simply don't want to serve, either because we can't effectively meet their needs or because working with them is just too painful. When individuals or organizations find themselves in rescue mode, there is a tendency to reach for the nearest lifeline. Too often it turns out to be the wrong decision because "easy money" is rarely easy.

Learn from the past

Given bull prices, the overall state of profitability for cow-calf customers, and growing global protein demand, it is understandable that seedstock producers

might simply ignore Drucker's five questions. However, history tells a different story and one to which we should pay careful attention. Do you remember when your phone had a rotary dial, your family photos were printed on paper by someone else, and music was purchased in the form of eight tracks and cassettes? You might also remember the names of the companies who provided the services. Then again, maybe not. Nonetheless, the cavalry failed to arrive in time to protect those industry giants from the forces of significant technological innovation and seismic shifts in market demand.

Sustain a profitable business

Avoiding Drucker's questions creates a significant level of risk by exposing the flanks of an organization to both internal and external forces. Customers and their perception of value *will* change! It is impossible to sustain a profitable business over the long term without an effective set of metrics that help guide decision-making. Even though the planning process may seem burdensome, failure to engage in effective strategy and tactical development is sure to undercut success. As Drucker accurately pointed out, a plan focuses attention on those activities that are no longer relevant and should be abandoned. Simultaneously it drives attention toward enhancing what does work while providing a process to assess opportunity, gauge risk and to seek new opportunities.

Thus, there are three options: Ignore reality and hope the cavalry can rescue us once the crisis begins, wait for crisis before adopting a proactive approach, or accept the responsibility for buffering our organization against the forces of change by tackling the hard work of answering tough questions followed by creation of an appropriate strategy and taking action.

Need the cavalry? Look in the mirror.

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