



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Build

We were created to build! The realms in which we have the opportunity to manifest that purpose are spectacularly wide — relationships, businesses, families, communities, structures, stories and the list goes on. Where does the motivation come from that drives humans to create?

Urge to create

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood, and don’t assign them tasks and work, but, rather, teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” We are hardwired to search. Each generation through time has undertaken quests both great and small in pursuit of discovery and the belief that opportunity lies beyond the horizon.

In truth, the desire to build comes both from pure inspiration and the necessity born of hardship, obstacles and misfortune. Regardless of the source that leads to the start of an enterprise, there is always risk, unexpected developments and opportunity. While the spark of initiation is a fascinating study, understanding the elements and commonalities of businesses that succeed beyond the influence of their founder is fundamental to the leaders of today’s companies and organizations.

In a recent interview, the venerable-management thought leader Tom Peters remarked that the difference maker between leaders of enterprises with sustained success and their competitors was whether or not they continued to learn by reading for both breadth and depth. Certainly there is more to the tale of success — effective execution of both the long-term strategy and the countless number of small daily decisions that build brand value, for example. However, those who fuel the fire of creativity and innovation are more likely to win over the long term.

Most people respond that reading and ongoing learning is a worthy goal, but in light of all the other pressures on their time, it is a luxury reserved for rainy days or the end of long, exhaustive days. History tells us that great leaders never leave learning to chance.

Lifelong learning

One of the greatest presentations on management in the cattle industry was given

by Nebraskan Jack Maddux at the 1981 Range Beef Cow Symposium. Maddux exhorted fellow agricultural business leaders and managers to recognize and respond to the following:

1. Make time to understand the profound changes occurring in the economy and marketplace, and develop a plan to assure competitiveness as the rules shift and evolve.
2. Develop a focused and disciplined approach to time management.
3. Develop the will to manage and arm yourself with the best mix of knowledge, relationships and skills to assure competitiveness.
4. Focus time, attention and resources on the “critical few” elements that profoundly affect your business.
5. Delegate responsibility for as much of the production work — the “doing” of beef cattle enterprise management — as is possible.

Tough-minded folks find a way to assure that learning is a central value of their organization. They focus personal energy and time to the process, while creating a culture within their company that actively encourages learning up and down the chain of command. Making the decision to allocate time to learning is the first step, and it is a decision that is available to all of us, regardless of our experience, place on the organizational chart or level of formal education.

I am firmly in the camp that reading is fundamental to the process but technology has broadened the learning platform to include mechanisms such as podcasts, YouTube, and a host of other audio-visual alternatives. Where to start?

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Because he may well be the best-read and most-networked business thinker on the planet, Tom Peters is a great hub from which to launch your learning crusade. Three suggestions — visit his website at www.tompeters.com; read his work *Reimagine! Business Excellence in a*

Disruptive Age; and study his book *The Big Little Things: 163 Ways to Pursue Excellence*.

Small Giants by Bo Burlingham is an extraordinarily valuable resource because it recognizes that business excellence scales across a number of industries and that at the heart of building a company that fulfills the people involved

is understanding that the foundation of greatness depends on culture, shared values and a mission that matters.

Seth Godin’s short book titled *The Dip* challenges our notions about quitting. We find it an exceptional tool for helping young entrepreneurs let go of the notion that they can be everything to everybody. In a quirky twist, it is also a pretty good resource for helping parents guide their children’s approach to learning and discovery.

Remember as you explore with these authors that you won’t agree with all they say, nor will you want to incorporate all of their ideas into your enterprise. Rather, read with the goal to find a couple of pearls of wisdom, to experience several aha moments, and to view the world through a different lens. No recipe for success is available, but in these turbulent times there are a host of fellow builders from whom to learn.

You were born to build something valuable. Get going!

Read — learn — discover!

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