



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Sources of innovation

Mention innovation in a conversation and most people conjure up images of Silicon Valley or some high-tech incubation workspace populated by caffeine-powered computer geeks who define a power wardrobe as a t-shirt with a cool logo, a comfortable pair of jeans and red Chuck Taylors. Certainly an amazing level of innovation originates from just such places, but they are not the sole proprietors of creativity and problem solving.

Identify the problem

Ask a bunch of cowboys about innovation and they will offer up 1,001 ways that baling wire and duct tape can be used to overcome mechanical breakdowns, crafted into infrastructure solutions or be creatively repurposed. Visit five ranches and 20 different versions of a gate latch can be found. My personal favorite — a tube sock duct-taped to the hook end of a broken bungee cord that had been designed to secure a barbed wire gate.

Regardless of the setting, innovation is not built from a recipe or a standardized process. Innovative solutions are rarely imagined, prototyped, developed into a finished product and brought to market by an individual. Collaboration is the secret sauce. If there are other common ingredients found in nearly all innovations, they are the identification of a problem (opportunity) followed by active experimentation and initiative. Underscoring the need for action is the recognition that failure is a necessary and valuable part of discovery.

Too often, innovation is viewed as the dominion of certain personality types — the cosmic dreamer or the mad scientist. Yet, as Tom Kelley, general manager of IDEO, points out, there is not one but 10 personality types, roles or styles that provide the optimal fuel mix for an organization to develop an innovation-driven culture. Kelley's true

insight is the awareness that innovative new ideas, like a newborn calf, depend on a nurturing environment to flourish. By having multiple viewpoints and skill sets at the table coupled with a “can do” attitude, organizations can confront challenges and more effectively convert problems to opportunities and alternative solutions to prototypes capable of being launched into the marketplace.

Consider livestock handling and how the power of observation, experimentation and creativity have opened the door to reducing stress on cattle and people alike. The rich discussion around facility design and stockmanship techniques has yielded substantial creativity and ultimately a better industry. Multiple voices and viewpoints, experiential learning and a design mentality provided an environment in

which alternatives could be explored, prototypes developed and improvements made. As important as well-known experts such as Temple Grandin and Bud Williams have been, the contributions of cowboys, handling-equipment designers, master welders and processing crews have been invaluable to the innovative efforts to enhance animal well-being.

While many corporations across the full spectrum of the economy invest significant resources into research and development, creativity emerges from every corner of society and from individuals both tasked with the responsibility and those who either by curiosity or necessity simply assume the work of solving problems through innovation. Successful business people understand the power of breakthroughs that emerge from unexpected sources.



Innovation doesn't have to be accompanied by pomp and circumstance; common and ordinary solutions are often more scalable than their more complex, sexier contemporaries.

As bicycle designer and manufacturer Joe Montgomery framed it, “I’m not worried about the big competitor. I’m worried about some guy in a barn someplace whose name I don’t even know right now.”

The independent team toiling away in a garage, basement or attic is a significant engine of commerce. These teams driven by a desire to shift the status quo, to forge a better life, to provide for their families in times of economic chaos and hardship or to experience the path of the entrepreneur are not assured success, but they are ferocious competitors.

Michael Glauser's work, *Glorious Accidents*, chronicles the story of companies begun by ordinary men and women. The common threads of the founders of these organizations were as follows:

- Knowledge of the business space;
- Take action to seize the opportunity;
- Find and learn from a mentor;
- Possess a fire in the belly;
- Demonstrate tenacity in the face of challenge;
- Build superior teams;
- Provide exceptional service;
- Separate want from need;
- Devoted to community; and
- Committed to action and improvement.

Not sure about your innovative capacity? Take a hard look at the last year on your farm or ranch and chronicle the problems you and your team solved and the challenges you overcame. What aggravations, no matter how small, were resolved? Innovation doesn't have to be accompanied by pomp and circumstance; common and ordinary solutions are often more scalable than their more complex, sexier contemporaries.

The future of the beef industry will be

Innovation resources

The Innovator's Dilemma, by Clayton Christensen

Glorious Accidents, by Michael Glauser

The Ten Faces of Innovation, by Tom Kelley

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determined by our ability to innovate at every level of the industry supply chain with the engagement of people ranging from day help to CEOs. Innovation is shared space where small firms may have a distinct competitive advantage. As Clayton Christensen writes in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, "The most powerful protection that small entrant firms enjoy as they build the emerging markets for disruptive technologies is that they are doing something that it simply does not make sense for the established leaders to do."

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Need to spark innovation? Tackle the following questions.

- ▶ What are the three most prevalent aggravations that we encounter daily?
- ▶ What steps could we take in the next 48 hours to resolve one of them?
- ▶ What would we need to do to become

the best in the world at what we do?

- ▶ How and what would we do if we started from scratch?

Not happy with the status quo? Innovate! Let's get started!



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