



Outside the Box

► by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Who's on first?

Remember the old Abbott and Costello conversation about the players on a baseball team? Their comedic version of an interaction between the manager and newest player on the team is a classic — while both individuals are focused on the same topic — their conversation becomes hysterically dysfunctional. As the frustration mounts, each participant tries more ardently to communicate, but the lack of clarity and inborn assumptions puts the conversation into a downward spiral. Does it remind you of anything in your own life and experience?

Communication

Conversations in organizations, businesses and families are often derailed by the same circumstances that Abbott and Costello satirized in their skit — a lack of a common language, relying on old assumptions, and pushing harder to get one's point across in an environment already ripe with frustration. Admittedly, I have been a participant in just such conversations. If we honestly assess our experiences, all too often we find that breakdowns in communication undermine the best intentions of individuals and teams.

Leaders of organizations, regardless of size, structure or resource availability, must ultimately rely on other people to assure sustained success. For most involved in beef cattle enterprises, that reliance falls on two basic categories of people — family and employees. Of course, in the most complicated of scenarios we combine the two by having family members as employees or business partners. Assuring success in these relationships requires a thoughtful and intentional approach that focuses on four basic arenas of effort — establishment and communication of expectation, feedback and recognition, assuring growth in the capacity of individuals and teams, and preparing for succession.

Establishing and communicating expectations

Because of the highly dynamic nature of agricultural production, it is challenging for leadership to step away from the “doing” part of the enterprise (especially in high demand seasons of the year — calving, breeding, etc.) to focus on creating a strategic plan of work that gets the right things done in the right

order by the right people. However, by being overly focused on the day-to-day needs or crisis of the moment, we miss opportunities to clearly state mission and goals, to effectively communicate desired outcomes, and to provide the training necessary to assure that quality work is accomplished.

How often do we give orders on the fly without taking a few moments to assure that both parties understand the goals, timeline and desired outcome? How often do we send people off to tackle a project with the assumption that surely they know what to do? Have you ever found yourself frustrated with an employee or family member when a job isn't done to your satisfaction and their response is “I didn't understand what you wanted”? Clear communication and appropriate training are essential to success. Accountability for these two items falls squarely on the shoulders of leadership.

Feedback and recognition

People are not automatons devoid of emotion and programmed to repeat the same task over and over again to some exacting standard. Rather, human beings need feedback and acknowledgement. An organizational culture that doesn't support measurable, immediate, direct feedback both up and down the chain of command and that fails to create an atmosphere that provides meaningful recognition will most certainly not reach sustained levels of exceptional performance. Keep in mind that monetary rewards may not be the end all.

Understand the underlying driving forces in your team and acknowledge their uniqueness when designing a recognition and rewards plan. If nothing else, remember, a pat on the back for both a job well done

or a failed attempt executed from a place of determination and effort can go a long way in building the capacity of your team.

Assuring growth

Boredom, monotony and being stuck in a routine are sure to undermine performance. People need opportunities to stretch themselves, to struggle against a meaningful challenge, and to master new skills. Just as a tree requires wind to stand upright, growing the capacity of your team depends on the skill of leadership to provide appropriate levels of responsibility, continuing education, and new mountains to climb. Accountability

from all parties is a needed ingredient to build capacity, and a high standard of expectation should be established and communicated. If everyone on the team is engaged in the process of actively seeking mastery and excellence, success is considerably more certain.

Preparing for succession

Succession planning is focused on the transfer of responsibility and accountability for the leadership of an organization. Having succession determined by death or disability is an undesirable circumstance. Creating an active plan to prepare the next generation for leadership is highly important.

Helping prepare a person or persons to take the reins is only step one. Additionally, the organizational team must be prepared for the transition. Of all the tasks facing the owners and leaders of established organizations, none is more critical than the effective development and execution of a succession plan.

Does your organization know who's on first?

To view Abbott and Costello's routine visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcRRaXV-fg.

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.

