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December 1997

## Empowering People

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*Rex Ranch (Nebraska), Sheridan Ranches and Deseret Ranches (Wyoming)*

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Teichert, Burke, "Empowering People" (1997). *Range Beef Cow Symposium*. 156.

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## **Empowering People**

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### PREFACE

I am the creator of very few original ideas. Over the years I have learned to recognize good ideas, modify and adapt them when necessary and use them to my advantage. This is because I am in a continual process of empowerment. Most of what I say here is borrowed from others. However, it has come about over such a long period of time and results from the melding of so many ideas that it has become an internalized part of me. This paper needs, and my many mentors deserve, footnotes and a bibliography to give credit to the originators of these ideas. That would be impossible; so I hope you will understand how much I owe to teachers, employers, mentors, co-workers, family and friends for helping me along the never-ending path of empowerment.

Statements of fact in this document are merely my strongly held beliefs--many of which can be corroborated by research and/or the experience and observations of others.

### INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a function of systems, attitudes and access. A ranching system is a grouping of subsystems which includes biological, climatic, business, financial and managerial processes. The system may be structured to enable and encourage or to impede empowerment of the team members. Access to ideas, research, training, tools, mentoring, modeling, etc. is vital to high level empowering. If the system is right, then the attitudes of the people involved will determine how much empowerment will take place.

Bosses and managers don't empower people. They enable and facilitate, but people at all levels of reporting are responsible for their own empowerment. Everyone, or nearly everyone, wants to succeed. We who are managers ought to take advantage of that. Give people a chance to succeed and most of them will.

I too often hear comments similar to this, "I don't need to know about people management. After all there's just me, the wife and the three kids." How demeaning! Ranchers with this attitude are missing out on full use of their most valuable resource--the combined human creativity that comes from a unified, integrated team.

As a manager, my job is to "Create an environment in which people want to excel and then provide the tools, training and freedom to do it." Tools can be anything from a shovel or pickup to a set of NRC tables or a computer printout of financial performance. Most managers don't really give the freedom for their people to succeed or excel. They expect the employee or family

member to become a robotic extension of themselves rather than an independently thinking, decision making adult. The employee knows the difference. They know if they succeeded or if the boss succeeded for them. If the boss continually has all the successes, he may have the employee's muscle; but he will never have his heart and mind.

The system and its structure creates the environment for empowerment. The individual's attitude opens the mind, provides the desire and releases the energy. Access provides the information, training, tools, opportunity, observation etc. that leads to knowledge, analysis, wisdom, judgement, better decisions and finally power. Power is earned by making a high proportion of good decisions.

## OUR SYSTEM

I have tried to develop a style of management and leadership which leads to a system that enables, encourages and rewards empowerment. I will try to describe my approach to management and show how it facilitates empowerment.

The five principles that follow are integral parts of a complete ranching system. They are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there is much overlap and interconnectedness. When well understood they blend into one system.

1. Effective management is both integrative and holistic.
2. Continuous improvement of key resources will sustain and enhance profit potential.
3. The cycle of PLAN, IMPLEMENT, CONTROL should address the ranch's key result areas and use the best tools and methods available for the optimum allocation of time, energy, thought, and money.
4. War on cost is made necessary by the economic necessity to compete with other ranches and other meat and protein sources.
5. An emphasis on marketing is required to insure that our products are sold to their highest and best use at a price that is fair to both buyer and seller.

I will now explain these five principles and show how they facilitate, encourage and reward personal empowerment.

An approach to management that is both integrative and holistic works to integrate applicable information and ideas into the planning process. As the planning process moves to evaluation and analysis, decisions are made that are best for the whole system. This process is not easy and requires the best thought and information available. The effects of a decision on a whole system; its land, livestock, and people; especially for the long term are not easy to estimate. Therefore, the more minds you have working on the problem, the better. Asking for input from an employee, spouse, son or daughter is in itself empowering.

Continuous improvement of the key resources is vital to the sustainability and enhancement of long term profits. At our ranches we have defined the key resources as land, livestock and people. We feel strongly that each must be continually improving. The focal point is improvement of the human resource. At the Rex Ranch each full time employee has one or

more herds of cattle assigned to him. He is responsible for the buildings, corrals, fences, stock water facilities and the land on which his herd(s) runs. He makes the day to day operating decisions for his cattle, land and other resources. He has input into the longer term decisions such as genetics, herd health program etc. I think this type of delegation encourages and rewards empowerment.

We expect each full time employee to complete a significant off ranch learning experience each year. The Range Beef Cow Symposium, a grazing school, an AI school, an IRM conference, etc. are the kinds of events we like our people to attend. In addition, we bring technical experts to our ranch to instruct our people or answer questions. Much of this comes about through cooperative efforts between us and the surrounding universities. Our people are also encouraged to attend local day or evening events such as Extension Service training or ranch field days.

There are risks to this kind of delegation and empowerment. However, the benefits that come from empowering people are worth the risks. If people improve, the land and livestock improve. In this type of system younger, less experienced people need more attention and supervision than older, more experienced people. We all work together to keep each other from making dumb mistakes. I very often find that my co-workers keep me from making bad decisions. I trust I do the same for them.

The cycle of plan, implement and control is the focus of many management textbooks, especially the older ones. While this is a very important part of management, it often ignores the human aspect. In ranching the owner, father or manager who may be all the same person is too often caught up in implementation. The planning is often poor or non-existent, and control is control of people rather than results.

I think the planning process should involve all of the people involved in the operation. Planning should be done by key result areas. At the Rex Ranch we have the following key result areas: 1) Range production, 2) Hay production, 3) Livestock production, 4) Cost and quality control, and 5) Marketing. At another ranch we produce no hay, but we have irrigated pasture; so we substitute irrigated pasture production for hay production in our list of key result areas. The key result areas need to be defined to fit each ranch.

Each year at budget time we do a plan for each key result area. Each person brings a plan for his herd and associated resources. These plans are thoroughly discussed and evaluated and culminate in a budget. Much input to this process comes in formal and informal meetings held throughout the year. When a plan and budget come together, each person is responsible to implement his part of the plan. We then have simple monitoring: procedures that gather information, process and summarize it and return it to all of our people. This coupled with ongoing observation of cow condition, range condition etc. become our major control points. This means that we as a group control results, and people control themselves. I don't even want to imagine what it would be like to do this without the help of an empowered group of people.

"War on cost" is more of an attitude than anything else. Finding a less expensive way comes from human creativity and ingenuity. Spreading fixed costs further by increasing stocking

rate or by increasing cows per man and reducing winter feed costs can only be done by the careful combination of art and science. Reducing overheads such as buildings, pickups and tractors requires the best of "how to" ingenuity. If people are working to solve these kinds of problems, they are becoming empowered.

While marketing is primarily my job, I rely heavily on the other members of our team to have cattle market-ready and to make sure that cattle are sorted to their highest potential. We want to sell cattle to their highest use, but no higher. Selling an animal for something it cannot do will result in a loss of customers. We have spent a lot of time learning marketing. Our people, who are in a process of empowerment, make sure that animals are sorted, fed, and presented for best marketing results.

## CONCLUSION

I hope this has helped you to understand:

1. Why I think the manager's job is to "Create an environment in which people want to excel and then provide the tools, training and freedom to do it."
2. Why empowerment is dependent on systems, attitudes and access.
3. How you might structure systems and provide access so that your co-workers will be encouraged to become empowered, life-long learners and will find rewards in having created their own successes.
4. How people must come to the system with the right attitude.
5. How a management style that shares information and provides opportunities for personal growth and success is good for everyone.
6. That the synergy of a well-led group of empowered people can produce excellent results.