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A COWBOY'S GUIDE TO BUILDING TEAMS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the daunting challenges facing the cattle industry in the near term is the ability to attract and retain skilled and effective human resources to the ranching business. We currently have at our disposal vast amounts of information about marketing, health, reproduction, nutrition, genetics, forage management, and financial decision-making to create and sustain a viable cow-calf, stocker, or feedlot business. In fact, any of the existing enterprise managers in the industry likely excel in a majority of the aforementioned topics. However, one of the major obstacles to success in agriculture is a failure to recognize that human beings are the foundation of the industry. The industry lacks a concerted effort to improve the management of relationships and the leadership of people.

WHAT MOTIVATES HUMAN BEINGS?

Motivation is the inner drive that largely defines human behavior. As intensity of motivation increases it becomes more likely that an individual will perform at reasonably high levels. However, motivation alone will not dictate human performance. Training, for example, is essential if motivation is to be forged into desirable results. Furthermore, individuals are motivated by a variety of rewards. Some people respond more favorably to external rewards (salary or praise) while others are motivated by internal rewards (personal satisfaction) (Erven and Milligan, 2001).

If an employer and their staff are to work as partners in an effective team, it is important to recognize and understand the factors that motivate each individual. Assuming that all people have similar needs often leads to problems stemming from poor communication and applying inappropriate reward strategies. Erven and Milligan (2001) point out that employees act to fulfill their individual needs and thus it is important that desired actions are adequately rewarded to assure that these actions provide job satisfaction which leads to internalization of performance.

Employees may be affected to improve motivation or to become dissatisfied by a variety of factors. Employee motivation may be enhanced by opportunities for achievement/recognition, satisfying work, opportunities to assume responsibility, and professional/personal growth that results from training and new experiences. Those factors that may lead to reduced motivation include lousy work conditions, unsafe equipment, excessively long work hours, poor pay, responsibilities that are mundane, unfair policies/rules, and conflict with co-workers and/or supervisors (Erven and Milligan, 2001). Managers must employ strategies that simultaneously reduce those factors that undermine

employee motivation while working to enhance that factors that lead to desirable performance.

Applying knowledge about human behavior and motivation to the process of making job assignments is critical. If the goal is to establish a productive work place, then employees should be encouraged to use multiple skills, have responsibility for completion of full projects not just components of a total job, and to use creativity. Furthermore, employees need to participate in a feedback exchange with their supervisors and to clearly understand the significance of their jobs to the success of the ranch or farm (Erven and Milligan, 2001).

BUILDING TEAMS

At least five steps (Fogleman, 2001) are required to assure that the management team is giving sufficient attention to the human resource.

1. Develop effective communication within the organization at all levels.
2. Initiate or evaluate/revise an employee-training program.
3. Initiate or evaluate/revise a system to allow meaningful evaluation and feedback.
4. Evaluate/revise the compensation package (both monetary and non-monetary).
5. Assess and evaluate the process of assigning responsibilities within the organization.

It is easy for management to say that the people in an organization perform as team members. However, team building requires undergoing a process composed of four stages – forming, storming, norming, and performing (Erven and Milligan, 2001). *Forming* involves the process of team members becoming acquainted, exchanging ideas, and becoming aware of how the team is to contribute to the overall mission of the business. *Storming* is the phase of team development that allows conflicting ideas to surface and for disagreement to occur in the open. If this stage is avoided, the longevity of the team is likely to be short. *Norming* is the resolution stage that follows expression of conflict. At this stage a leader(s) is identified and team member roles are assigned. The final stage is *performing* and is characterized by the team solving problems for the good of the business and the team members. In this stage members of the team continue to be actively involved in decision-making.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Less than one-third of family-owned agricultural businesses are successfully transferred beyond the second generation. A summary of the literature yields a series of common mistakes that undermine the survival of the enterprise. These mistakes can be categorized as follows:

1. Failure to plan highlights the list. The primary planning areas include:
 - a) production plans that describe the functions of the business or the “doing” aspects of the enterprise;
 - b) strategic planning that focuses on the financial objectives;

- c) the succession plan that defines the line of authority in the business and the training process that will be utilized to prepare the next generation for assuming leadership of the enterprise; and
 - d) the estate plan that mitigates the financial consequences of the death of the owners and establishes an orderly transition to the next generation of leadership.
- 2. Failure to effectively communicate is a leading challenge in many ranching and agricultural enterprises. One of the critical elements of facilitating communication is establishment of a regularly scheduled business meeting for management and employees. These meetings ought to address the following topics including:
 - a) scheduling and prioritizing the activities of the business to assure that the critical functions are accomplished and that responsibility is clearly assigned;
 - b) provision of a forum for ideas, input, and suggestions as to how to better meet the production and strategic goals of the business;
 - c) creating an atmosphere of teamwork and a sense of shared commitment to meeting worthwhile goals; and
 - d) minimizing potential conflict by assuring that information, accountability, and emerging challenges are shared within the team.
- 3. Many ranch managers typically ignore training. Yet, the most critical component of assuring that the enterprise will continue to improve its long-term performance is development of a system of training opportunities for leaders and employees. Human beings require learning as a part of their emotional and intellectual health. We need to be exposed to new ideas and concepts as a means to upholding enthusiasm, commitment, and productivity. Training opportunities should be included as part of the compensation or incentive package for all those involved in the business.
- 4. Maintaining a regular and systematic employee review is an important approach to the retention of key employees and to helping all involved in the business seek improvement. Managers also need to maintain a timely series of self-evaluations to assure that the quality of leadership being provided is first-rate. These evaluations should be frank and objective while being conducted in a framework of looking for ways to grow and improve both as individuals and as a business. Remember that confidentiality is important if sense of trust is to be maintained between employee and employer.
- 5. Catch people doing things right. People respond positively to praise, encouragement, and sincere recognition. Too often, we spend our time focused on the mistakes or shortcomings of our children, spouses, colleagues, and employees. Instead of “don’t do it that way” try “suppose we try this”. When a person is assigned a task, don’t micromanage them or undermine their ability to get the job done just because you can do it faster.

6. Be sensitive to cultural and gender differences. The beef industry will become increasingly dependent on employees of non-Anglo heritage. When employees come from diverse cultures, it is critical for managers to learn about the history, traditions, and values of those cultures. Learning to speak at least a few phrases in another person's language can go a long way in breaking down communication and trust barriers. Finally, showing appreciation for the holiday celebrations, food and music of other cultures can clearly enhance the quality of the work environment. Women are playing an increasingly important role in agricultural professions and as such management has an obligation to provide an environment that is welcoming and safe.

PLANNING

Planning is nothing more than asking and answering a series of questions. Meeker (1998) suggests that the initial steps of the planning process involve the following questions:

1. What do I want to do?
2. What should I do?
3. What can I do?
4. What am I good at?
5. What are my resources?
6. What are my limitations?
7. What is the best use of my resources?

Once these questions have been answered, the foundation has been laid for a more detailed enterprise plan. The process involves establishment of a mission statement, an enterprise strategy or action plan, establishment of specific goals and deadlines, and a continuous process of prioritizing and re-assessment. As an organization moves into implementation of its goals and objectives, it is useful to have a set of measures against which decisions can be tested. Meeker (1998) suggests that test measures should include the following: will it yield an economically sustainable outcome, is the decision environmentally responsible, will flexibility in decision making be maintained, and will it yield satisfaction for the people involved?

The planning stage is crucial to the ability of an organization to move towards predetermined goals. In as much as is possible, it is important to include employees (especially key employees) in the process.

COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING

Implementing the plan requires that everyone in the organization is able to function from an informed position. A great plan is sure to fail if those expected to implement it neither understand nor embrace the concept. The communication and training process should be initiated from the first interview with a job candidate. The number of lost opportunities that result from a poor hiring and training process is significant.

Training should focus on achieving the ranch’s production targets in a profitable fashion. Job responsibilities should be clearly and thoroughly defined. The worst possible approach is to assume that a new or even an existing employee has the same level of familiarity with the enterprise as supervisors. At the same time, it is equally erroneous to assume that an employee can read the manager’s mind. Thus, in addition to a good explanation, it is important to demonstrate procedures and protocols to assure clarity of communication. During these training sessions or teachable moments, it is very important that the trainer seeks feedback to assure that the trainee understands the message. Furthermore, it is important to define the job performance expectations in both qualitative and quantitative terminology. While it may seem like over-kill, development of an outline that specifies the skills that new hires are to master and a timeline of expectations can be a useful tool (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of job skills, measurement of skill mastery, and maintaining a record of certification. Adapted from Tyler, 1998.

Job/procedure	Skills required for mastery	Performance goal	Date of certification
<i>Feeder cattle processing</i>	Hydraulic chute operation	__ number of cattle per hour	
	Injection procedures	Zero non-conformities	
	Scale reading/calibration	Accurate measures	
	Humane cattle handling	Zero non-conformities	
	Accurate record keeping	Zero mistakes	
<i>Calving procedures</i>	Recognition of calf position	Provide timely assistance, no c-sections	
	Understand stages of birth	> 98% live calves	
	Intervene appropriately	Zero injury to cows or to calves from intervention	
Tagging and record keeping	Tag in correct ear and create readable tattoo	High accuracy in < 3 minutes per calf	
	Correctly record calf id, cow id, sex of calf, etc.	Zero mistakes	

FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION

One of the biggest challenges for many ranchers is the ability to effectively communicate. I remember a conversation with a friend who owns and manages a large ranch where we joked about starting the Cowboy Communicators Club. We doubted that a meeting would ever get called because of our strong ties to the John Wayne approach to dialogue: “Talk low, talk slow, never say too much.” Providing good training is only one step in attaining high levels of performance from the team. Without an effective system of

feedback and evaluation, it is unreasonable to expect people to improve their job performance as well as their commitment to the organization.

The keys to better leadership of people includes the following:

1. Give feedback so that people can know how they are doing. It is unfair to your people if they have to guess how their work is judged. Mistakes can be significantly reduced and both time and cost savings made when people have access to regular and immediate feedback. Providing reasons for the decisions being made can go a long way in developing loyalty amongst team members.
2. Communicate expectations, provide training, and then get out of the way. No one likes to be micro-managed. Once the job is finished or at an appropriate intermediate step of the process, the supervisor should provide constructive evaluation with a focus on continuous improvement and achieving the stated goals of the enterprise. An important part of the process is to seek employee input as to how a job might be accomplished more effectively.
3. Remember to give and share credit. This approach goes a long way towards improving the performance of a team. The power of the words “thank you” and “you did a good job” are too often underestimated.
4. Having team members appropriately matched with responsibilities and expectations is critical to the success of the team. For example, it is unreasonable for a football team to assign a 300-pound defensive lineman the responsibility for deep coverage against a talented wide receiver. At the same time, it is important to seek opportunities for people in the organization to develop new skills and achieve personal growth.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE FAMILY BUSINESS

The family business is both wonderful and maddening. No other socio-economic structure has the complexities that come as part and parcel of the family business. At the heart of the family business is the intersection of three systems: the family circle, the business management circle, and the ownership circle. People can hold a position in one or all of the circles and their relationship to one another are further complicated by their various life stages. At any one time in a family business, people may be involved who by virtue of their age and level of maturity have vastly different perspectives relative to risk tolerance, a desire for control and authority, and lifestyle. Finally, multi-generational businesses are also challenged with the task of incorporating new faces into the social fabric of the family via marriage.

Several key characteristics are required of the people involved in an effective family ranch: patience, persistence, understanding, courage, personal strength, and forgiveness (Hanson, 1991). The establishment of trust is paramount to the sustained success of a family-owned business. The foundation of trust is the ability to communicate within the family and to develop a deep understanding of the needs, abilities, and limitations of others.

Perhaps the most difficult task is keeping the business on track using the keen mind of a strategist and the purposeful heart of the entrepreneur while nurturing individuals with the loving heart of a parent and spouse and the mindset of a leader who views individuals as having worth beyond the business circle.

Planning, communicating, and training all come home to roost in the family business. If sufficient time and attention are not given to these processes then the success and harmony of the family-owned enterprise is likely to be significantly diminished. If you want to pick only one book from the suggested reading list, then get a copy of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey. I would also strongly encourage you to read the chapters titled “Eight ways to enrich marriage and family relationships” (Chapter 12), and “Making champions of your children” (Chapter 13) in Covey’s book Principle-Centered Leadership.

Cohn (1992) lists seven primary factors as potentially devastating to a family business: lack of clear objectives, conflict between family and business systems, disharmony due to differences in stage of life cycle, lack of commitment by participants, power struggles, financial stress, and failure to recognize the value and impact of key non-family employees. While there are no recipes for ensuring harmony in the family-owned enterprise, it is key that a process is in place to assure that conflicts and disagreements can be resolved before they become destructive.

Zimmerman and Fetsch (1994) developed a consensus-building model that is both pragmatic and effective. There are six considerations in their approach:

1. Establish family rules and a shared vision.
2. Improve family communication and conduct business meetings.
3. Create departments within the business and appoint managers.
4. Develop task lists that are prioritized. Assign resources and establish deadlines.
5. Maintain and communicate monthly activity calendars.
6. Resolve equality issues.

The need for a mission statement, objectives, and mutually-agreed upon goals have been clearly stated previously, so we will assume its importance. Implementing the family business meeting (employees included) is a crucial step towards improving communication, allocating resources, and focusing on achievement. These meetings should be held regularly at neutral sites (not at Mom’s table), an agenda should be used to promote focus, and the approach should be professional. A recorder should write down and distribute the decisions that were reached in the meeting. The primary goal of these efforts should be to help determine priority tasks, delegate responsibility for specific jobs, schedule and allocate resources, and clarify issues.

The creation of departments and appointment of various family members and employees to achieve the objectives of each division allows people the opportunity for autonomy, professional growth, and a deeper sense of ownership and control. This also allows the family to allocate tasks according to the skills, expertise, and experience of

different people within the organization. Each department manager is responsible for establishing the process, resources, and timeline needed to achieve the goals associated with their department. By sharing the needs and priorities of each department, resources can be more effectively shared and communication stays focused on achievement.

The advantage of this system is that it facilitates planning, makes it easier for departments to share resources, promotes communication and reduces conflict. Furthermore, each manager develops a better understanding of his or her department's role in the total enterprise. Trust is established that important tasks will get done, and individuals can better anticipate their schedules. The process is further enhanced when a monthly calendar of activities is maintained. This effort allows the communication of time commitments that are both related to business issues and family or personal commitments. By referring to the calendar, people can anticipate time commitments, improve flexibility, and better balance the demands of work and family life.

Equality issues may be rooted in family history, sibling rivalry, inability of parents and children to move into a partnership relationship, and integration of new spouses into business and family systems. These issues frequently manifest themselves as struggles over decision-making, compensation, accountability, vacations, housing, and level of ownership. In many cases, families will be best served by utilizing the expertise of professional estate planners, business management consultants, family counselors, or others trained in mediation. The important task in resolving these equality issues is to clearly communicate expectations, rules, and timelines.

Addressing these issues can sometimes be frustrating and painful. However, if these issues are not addressed, the likelihood of the business transferring to the next generation is severely lessened.

PUTTING RELATIONSHIPS FIRST IN BUSINESS

At the end of the day, most of us enjoy the experience of looking at a freshly plowed field, a herd of cows and their new calves, an improved pasture, or a freshly repaired barn. But at the end of our lives, we will measure our success by the quality of our relationships. Farming and ranching give human beings the unique opportunity to invest themselves in the principles of stewardship and husbandry. As we endeavor to improve our herds, our land, and our businesses, it is critical that we integrate the stewardship of people into our efforts.

In a 1998 issue of Successful Farming, the editors listed 10 ideas that would enable managers to grow more happiness and fulfillment from their agricultural enterprises. I would suggest that these concepts ought to be considered for inclusion in your operation in the future.

1. *Seek and build strong relationships.* Herein lies the secret to happiness. True success is the result of teams of highly motivated people who are committed to the achievement of worthwhile goals.

2. *Make time for fun and renewal.* Don't forget to take care of the emotional and spiritual needs of yourself and those for whom you have responsibility.
3. *Prepare to live your dreams* and be willing to make appropriate sacrifices that allow you freedom of choice in the future.
4. *Listen outside the box.* Take time to access information, ideas, and professional networks outside of your own industry. Good ideas are everywhere.
5. *Think inside the box.* In the end, our professional success is the result of our ability to clearly identify and invest in those activities we enjoy, are good at, and can control. When we identify the needs of the business and then identify employees that complement or bring new skills to the enterprise we have the best opportunity to maximize our success.
6. *Learn to manage with decimal points.* Applying effective business control measures will allow us to better plan, implement, and harvest desired results from our resources.
7. *Accept that learning takes forever.* Failure to self-train and to provide training opportunities for those in our business will certainly undermine long-term profitability. Unleashing our curiosity facilitates access to new sources of information, to people who challenge our paradigms, and to useful innovations.
8. *Express with passion your convictions.* Sir Walter Scott wrote "One hour of life, crowded to the full with glorious action, and filled with noble risks, is worth whole years of those mean observances of paltry decorum, in which men steal through existence, like sluggish waters through a marsh, without either honor or observation."
9. *Encourage others.* In my studies of successful organizations (ranches, businesses, sports teams, etc), the common denominator is that the successful leader sets high goals, empowers people to achieve them, and then gives them the credit for the victories.
10. *Give back generously.* By sharing our time, talent, and other resources to improve the condition of our families, employees, communities, and industry we find fulfillment.

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