



Finding fault

By Steve Suther

Constructive criticism is the most valuable tool in the beef industry, perhaps in all walks of life. The key is to recognize the need for it, remain open to it and include it when replanning.

Perfection is an elusive and usually unattainable goal, but idealism drives us and our cowherds closer to that end.

As our market community has become a global village, what we do affects others all over the world. They buy our beef, for example, and we value consumer criticism.

However, we must filter it with logic, and that can be a wild card. Not all criticism is valid or constructive.

When we “consider the source,” it’s easy to discard comments that don’t fit our world view or cash flow. And while there are many “inconvenient truths” out there, misconceptions don’t become true just because they are frequently quoted.

So our logic filter for criticism is a focal point. Does it let through the social and fad-oriented opinions not backed by science? Does it allow consideration of survey data, still not consistent with science but representing a valid snapshot of what people think?

Certainly, most logic filters will allow for suggestions backed by research and published in professional journals, where peer review and criticism are required doorways.

In the rural community, neighbors can provide peer review if you engage in regular dialog about what you are doing and why. If you can’t explain or justify your approach at that level, you could be off course.

More locally, on the farm or ranch, employees or other family members see what works or doesn’t every day. Do you tap into that resource or focus on staying the course to maintain an illusion of perfection?

Face it: sometimes things go wrong, and sometimes that’s because the plan was not universally endorsed or even known. There’s more than one way to skin a cat, catch a calf, build a fence or interpret data. It usually pays to discuss plans, even if you must ultimately act alone.

We learn from discussing past mistakes if we are open to peer review rather than changing the subject, pointing out bigger flaws in others or remarking on “20/20 hindsight.” To make perfection less of an illusion, keep the logic filter open among peers, and be sure to maintain an expansive definition of peer.

Few people welcome a constant critic, or one who constantly promotes his view as ideal. Somewhere in between, however, honest and constructive opinions are shared and valued.

Criticism can be most effective when directed at a group that can't argue the facts: your cowherd.

If you've ever paid attention to genetics, evaluated bulls and culled cows on progeny performance, that herd is better today. As manager you have the freedom to take any critical action, but again, you might gain substantially by discussing your plans and progress, adjusting your logic filter as new information comes up.

Heifers that are the result of many generations of careful, information-backed selection, should be a source of some pride. They should also be recognized as a work in progress, still in need of fault-finding that must go all the way back to your picture of ideal.

None are perfect, and you will be able to rank them by several production and convenience traits. Such a system of routine evaluation provides structure and logic for culling and moves the herd toward an ideal. It's not a fast-moving target, but neither is today's ideal the same as your grandfather's.

When it comes to consumer opinions, we may always be tempted to change the subject or say they don't know enough to provide valid criticism. To that point, we must clarify that the consumer is not a monolithic entity, but many millions of opinions.

We can't dwell on the blow-hard or misinformed critic, but we must listen to each of them. Their opinions will affect our logic filters when they begin to move markets or government policies.

Next time in *Black Ink*[®] Miranda Reiman will take a look at sorting. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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