



## *Outside the box*

If you get up each morning and apply the accepted “best management practices,” you will be successful by yesterday’s standards. Only when you try something new do you have a chance to move ahead.

Yes, that brings up chance, or risk. If safety were the only human motivator, we would never take our first steps. Risk is innovation’s partner, and most new ideas are at first considered unworkable, crazy or even dangerous. But nothing is more powerful than a new idea once it is developed and acted upon to advantage.

There is no such thing as a “mature” company or business—that’s just a euphemism for stagnant—there are only those whose managers seem to have run out of new ideas.

Where do ideas come from? Observation. Dissatisfaction. Necessity. Other people.

Many of the innovations in cattle handling have come from watching the animals interact with their environment and with humans. Scientists devise organizing principles by observing patterns in data. Children, humanity’s best free thinkers, see new things about the world every day and ask questions that lead to new ideas. Everyone learns by observing failure.

The farmer who is happy or oblivious about the profit from his cowherd rarely has a new idea. To be progressive is to never allow oneself to be satisfied. Innovations in education, business and labor come from dissatisfaction more than anything else. In fact, vibrant companies value customer complaints as a key to the search for better practices.

By one popular account, the branded beef movement began in earnest when a producer was dissatisfied with the steak he ordered at an elite restaurant. There must be a way to reduce the chances of this happening, he thought. The resulting idea was specification-based branding.

Sometimes the moment's need forces us to try something we would not ordinarily think of. We find ourselves outside of the box, where there are no best management practices, only an immediate problem. Usually, the moment's solution only works for the moment, but sometimes it changes how we work from then on, or at least whenever the situation recurs.

Ideas come from people's minds. Therefore, the more people you interact with, the more ideas you are likely to encounter. You don't have to go to a meeting many miles from home to find innovation, however. Are you disregarding ideas from less experienced family members because they just don't understand the limitations? When you dismiss an employee's input with an annoyed shrug, you're saying, in effect, "you aren't paid to think." But thinking should be part of everyone's job.

A lot of successful cattle businesses have regular meetings of family and employees where ideas are openly debated without fear of embarrassment or job security. Make sure all members of your team feel empowered to share their observations and ideas, or you will miss out on valuable resources.

Sometimes an idea seems hopeless, but contains a spark of genius that you hate to throw away. Call it an idea whose time has not yet come and bring it up periodically to see if the changing world finally allows it to bloom. Don't discount ideas that were examined or even tried unsuccessfully 10 years ago.

Neighbors are usually up to something new, and if it's not too radical, they may be glad to share the concept over the pasture gate or from their pickup window. Better yet, ask if you can

ride around with them and see what's new. Some of the neatest ideas have come from groups of farmers with common interests who take turns offering pasture walks or hayrack tours.

Extend the networking beyond your township to those who are farther away but have common interests. They might all use the same beef records service, veterinarian or bull supplier. They might finish cattle at the same feedlot or face similar environmental challenges. Such groups can have informal—or formal—brainstorming sessions to the advantage of all.

Not everyone will share ideas freely. Maybe they are afraid of giving away trade secrets. But most people find keeping an idea as “proprietary” is like keeping a light under a bushel basket. If you want it to do any good, you have to let it shine.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at marketing plans. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [cabsteve@aol.com](mailto:cabsteve@aol.com).

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