

Attitude & Agriculture

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I don't know if it's because I am reading more or just paying more attention to it but, if you read most agriculture headlines it sure makes you wonder what the heck we're all in this industry for. The usual justification most people will give is lifestyle. Well I don't know about you but when I recently read that agriculture has some of the highest levels of depression, divorce and suicide rates it doesn't sound like that healthy a lifestyle. I'm not saying I know all the answers for the current state of affairs but I know that if things are going to change it all has to start with the right attitude.

There are all sorts of buzz words in agriculture these days. Go to enough meetings over a winter and you'll start chanting them in your sleep. What you can't hear enough of these days is the term "value chain". A common definition of a value chain is "a string of companies working together to satisfy market demands." The value chain typically consists of one or a few primary suppliers and many other suppliers that add on to the value that is ultimately presented to the buying public.

This sounds pretty exciting, warm and fuzzy, however the only way the "Value Chain" will work is if all the partners make a fair return on their investment and a reasonable profit. If we're going to make this work we have to have the right attitude. Our primal instinct of the hunter and the hunted is an attitude that can quickly surface. If that happens the relationship becomes a partnership of one partner taking advantage of the other for their own benefit. I usually see this as the case and so then we might as well call it a "screw you chain".... Whereby we work as hard as possible to take advantage of our partners before they take advantage of us.

The "screw you chain" is a major problem in agriculture. Everybody seems to be looking for short term gain. Guess what?.... it leads to long-term pain and probably part of the reason things in Ag are the way they currently are.

After my article, "Two Beef Solutions for Sustainable Grain Farming", I was posed the question: what are the hindrances holding back grain farmers and cattle producers from working together? Well there are probably many answers to that question and I can only answer them the way I see it.

- 1) People in agriculture have become more and more independent. They have forgotten how to work together and have little willingness to do so. I guess if that attitude exists it's pretty hard to get out of the start gate and on the value chain road of happiness.
- 2) With revolving credit these days many people treat their neighbors like their bills and put off paying them. I think this is a big problem and nothing can get under

- your skin more than people that don't pay their bills on time. Many producers can be notorious for this and its no wonder relationships break down.
- 3) Not keeping your word. I am still a romantic about the days of when a hand shake agreement meant something.... however now if its not signed and commissioned by a witness it seems to mean nothing. People have forgot what it means by sticking to their word and following through on what they say they will do.
 - 4) Nickel and diming a relationship to death. Human nature it seems is to get a good deal and people will sacrifice a long-term relationship with a neighbor because they might get a better deal in the short term by dealing with someone else. Good luck getting that relationship back on track when you think its worth your while to go get something with your neighbor going again.

I think more often people need to remind themselves that they need to think about their business dealings in the way they would want someone to treat them. Personally, Erika and I love long-term deals. Dealings we can count on, ones in which our word means something and it is of benefit to our partners. It also means that when the transaction is completed the check is in the mail or on the kitchen table.

The other part of the attitude in agriculture that I am growing sick of is: people that hoard information to themselves and then wait for other people to fall on their face so that they can be there for the windfall. A friend of mine recently relayed comments to me that he received from some beef producers after a winter feeding demonstration. The demonstration had show cased different low cost winter feeding alternatives to help other producers improve their bottom line. The comment he received was, "these ideas need to kept quite otherwise too many people may be able to lower their costs of production and take away their strategic advantage". Well if that isn't the most selfish narrow minded comment I have ever heard! If that's how we will need to succeed then we might as well limit people from going to school or universities as well.

Agriculture is about communities, as agriculture fails or vertical integrates as the government would put it.... Communities die and I am pretty sure that we are all well aware of that taking place. The truth is, the future of agriculture will require more people working together and for that to succeed there needs to be transparency and cooperation.

This brings me to my last point. I recently had to get some information from the Alberta Beef Producers web site. I thought that slogan of, "If it ain't Albert it ain't beef" was long dropped...well it wasn't and there it was staring me in the face. Perhaps some people believe that slogan sells beef but to me it's an insult to all the other cattle producers in Canada. In fact, add it up, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have as many cows as Alberta and when it comes to raising them they have some significant advantages.

I had the good fortune to tour and work in many South American Countries. These ranchers were all proud of their beef industry; however not once did I hear a group of producers from one province or state, tout themselves over another. They all referred to their beef industry as a nations industry. Provinces need to work together rather than going of in their own directions.

The state of agriculture is not going to change overnight, however we all have an impact on it and it all starts with our attitude. I am not a big bible reader, however the statement, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you makes pretty good common sense”.

Part 2. OYF Canada...Helping to Retain the Youth in Agriculture

Recently I was asked to speak about how to retain youth in agriculture. At first I thought it would be a pretty tough presentation to put together....”After all what is the magic formula for attracting youth and bringing on the next generation?” All my life my training has focused on production... so I was starting to get a bit concerned about the daunting question. At least so it was until Erika and I had the chance to go to the national level of the Outstanding Young Farmers of Canada in Saskatoon. The experience was inspiring to say the least and certainly one of the most powerful conferences that we had ever attended. As it turned out it made the presentation a whole lot easier than I thought that it was going to be.

So, what is the magic formula?... well there is no one clear and simple answer but if I had to sum it up into one word it would all come down to: “Attitude”. To distill it to that level however requires a bit of a history lesson, first about the Outstanding Young Farmers of Canada program. The program began in 1980 and is made up of representation by seven regions from within Canada. These include the Atlantic region, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta/NWT and B.C./Yukon. Every year within these regions there is a regional selection for farmers between the ages of 18 and 39 based on their progress in their agriculture career, environmental stewardship, production history, financial and management practices, contributions to the well being of the community, province and nation and finally financial progress. From this selection process one honoree couple is chosen to represent the region at the national level.

The national selection is a week long event. All regional honorees are interviewed several times, as well as give several presentations to the other honorees and public at large. As hectic as this may sound, the week’s activities are also mixed with lots of tours and time to get to know one another as well as getting to know the alumni from previous years. For Erika and I this was the most powerful part of the experience. Never had we been around a more up beat group of farmers and ranchers than those represented by the alumni of OYF Canada. You could feel the passion, the love of life and the excitement of how these people approached their day to day challenges in life and in business. Best of all, there was an eager willingness for these people to share in their experiences and ideas.... Something which I feel is a rarity these days.

This past year’s honorees were about as diverse as it could get in terms of agriculture representation. There were dairy farmers, hog and beef producers, greenhouses, grain enterprises and market gardens. However, for as diverse as the group was, there were similarities amongst all of us, not minding the fact that we were all under the age of 40. These similarities were what intrigued us the most about the group. It was perhaps also

why every one of them was chosen to represent their region at the national level. In fact, herein right in front of my eyes was the formula for retaining youth in agriculture.

The first thing we noticed about all the couples was that they were introduced and given responsibilities in agriculture early in life. They had parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors that encouraged them in their decisions and had taught them to see the glass as half full rather than as half empty. Now as these honorees raise the next generation, they too are doing the same thing with their children... giving them responsibilities and encouragement in their own endeavors. I have said it before and will say it again, “agriculture has had a reverse culling progress”. Too many parents encourage the smart ones to get away from agriculture and the ones that couldn’t make it in the outside world stay behind. This was not the case in these honorees.

Education; everyone of the honorees had some form of post-secondary education. Education teaches you to look at things with a different set of eyes. For myself education has taught me that the more I know, the less I really do know. Yet the education is what is needed for developing skills and net works for problem solving.

Every one of the honorees was quick to acknowledge that their “advisory network” were a key part of the success in their business. Some people think this knowledge can be gained from the coffee shop... however no one seemed to give that as a part of the formula for their success.

For as much drive as every one of the honorees had for their particular agriculture industry they also all had an inner happiness. They all had strong marriages and they all worked as husband and wife partners on and in their businesses. This I believe is another part of their success formula. As more spouses work of farm there is a growing disconnect to the business as well as a drop in the combined IQ level of the management team. It is a common fact that women look at the world differently than men, yet this different view point is often what is needed to move farm enterprises in the right direction. The husband/wife teams were one of the most interesting things I observed about the OYF conference... it was the first time we had been to an agriculture conference with an even split between males and females.

There is no magic answer for retaining youth in agriculture, however thanks in part to programs like the Outstanding Young Farmers of Canada a network of positive out of the box thinkers exists to encourage those that do want to make their living from agriculture. I encourage more people to become involved and for additional info check out the website at www.oyfcanada.com.

The 2006 OYF conference was an unbelievable experience for Erika and I. We would again like to thank all the honorees in sharing in their experiences and stories as well as thank the Saskatchewan crew in doing a bang up job in organizing the week’s activities and making us feel at home. We look forward to seeing you all again next year.