



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Investing in youth

Agricultural organizations have a long history of investment in youth programming — 4-H, FFA, junior breed associations and the like have all made significant returns on the expenditures. Check the résumés of county commissioners, school board members, local and county government committees and task forces, as well as the leadership of local, state and national agricultural organizations. The near universal common thread is that their leadership career was begun as a member of a youth group.

Catalyst for thought

Based on this success, it would be easy to conclude that today's approach to youth development is sufficient. To do so, however, would be a mistake. While we have an obligation to honor the success of the past, it is essential that we reimagine these organizations dedicated to nurturing the spirit of young people. It is critical that we assure that they are relevant for the future and correctly focused and resourced to develop the vibrant leadership force required to assure prosperity.

One compelling reason demands our attention to this task — to settle for “good enough” will most surely set the bar too low for what will be required of families, enterprises and the nation in years to come.

There are no comprehensive solutions contained in this column, but hopefully these thoughts will serve as a catalyst for serious discussion as to the outcomes we should aspire to and the efforts required to create our highest aspirations. Youth development must yield a generation characterized by the following six traits.

Purposefulness

Purposeful living is to make the most of gifts and talents; it is the recognition that far more important than what we get from life is what we give. Mark Twain once wrote that “the two most

important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” As a society we are in danger of becoming less

concerned with purpose and more focused on demanding what we think we are owed. Guiding the

next generation away from self-absorption is critically important.

35 Keys to Success

Youth Development



Passion

Passion goes hand in hand with understanding purpose — it is the fuel borne of a person's deep desire to establish meaning. While a stadium full of fans can simulate passion, these effects are fleeting. Lasting value occurs when the individual discovers their passion and takes the steps necessary to harness it for good, which most often means connecting their passion and purpose to that of teammates, partners and colleagues.

Bravery

The great enemy of passion and purpose is fear. Thus, bravery is an essential objective of a thoughtful youth-development program. Bravery is fundamental to the future because, without it, human beings shrink from the unknown and fall victim to Ben Franklin's admonishment that those who “would give up essential liberty for temporary safety deserve neither.” If we are to raise a generation of courageous citizens, then we must remove from our systems of education those doctrines that stifle curiosity, creativity, and the capacity to ask meaningful questions and to wholeheartedly pursue the answers.

Resilience

Resilience is the inner core that allows us to overcome adversity,

to be strengthened by challenge, and to maintain a healthy level of tolerance for failure. Discovery, innovation and mastery are not “one and done” experiences; rather, each requires the capacity to cope with setbacks, to learn from mistakes and the ability to step back onto the playing field after failing.

Accountability

Accountability is the discipline to accept responsibility and through the development of self-reliance to become invaluable to a team or partnership. Accountability is a willingness to be on record — to be stuck with the consequences of our choices, actions and behaviors. Without accountability it is impossible to choose to live on purpose or to realize the full potential of individual and collective talent. The rules in markets,

economies, industries and culture are fluid and given the intense pressure on these systems, the next generation must be equipped to recognize consequence and to critically assess the tradeoffs that come when the environment has muted into many shades of gray.

Care

At the heart of a person’s ability to generate a positive impact is the capacity to, as my grandmother put it, “give a hoot.” Identifying and acknowledging what we care about is an essential part of life’s journey. Caring is not enough. The difference maker is having the gumption to take action. Pride of ownership and good stewardship are born from the knowledge of what matters — that which matters enough to invest our time, talent and resources.

To attain these outcomes requires placing more responsibility in the hands of our youth, both individually and in teams. We have to stop protecting them from failure and restrain ourselves from repeating the ready-made recipes of the past. For a thought-provoking read, I recommend Seth Godin’s *Stop Stealing Dreams* that can be downloaded for free at www.squidoo.com/stop-stealing-dreams.



EMAIL: tfield2@unl.edu

Editor’s Note: *Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.*