

When Less Is More

In agriculture, many people are wired to work hard — driven by the mantra that “more is more.” You can get more done, grow your business, make more money. But over-achieving can also come with the price of burnout, as well as detrimental effects to health and family relationships.

So it was refreshing to read a column by Clay Mathis, director of the King Ranch Institute for Range Management at Kingsville, Texas. Mathis titled his column “Modeling Balance” and wrote that an aspect between “good” and “excellent” managers is recognizing the importance of maintaining balance between work and family.

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— Clay Mathis

He wrote, “Those that naturally rightly rise to the top of management in the ranching industry are generally the hard-working, intelligent, achievers that clearly show they are interested in the good of the operation. But if they are to be truly excellent managers, they won’t just make the right decision for the business, they will also prioritize their responsibilities well. This goes beyond the responsibilities at the ranch or office. Excellent managers have their lives in balance and they model that balance to those who look to them for leadership.”

Mathis pointed out that ranch managers and employees often work 60-70 hours a week at times — that’s just the nature of the farm and ranch business. But he emphasized that sustained

workloads at that level are not good for the employees or the ranch as a whole — at some point, a less stressful schedule is necessary.

To back this up, Mathis shared research from Stanford University that showed employee output declines sharply after a 50-hour workweek and drops so much after 55 hours that someone working 70 hours produces no more output than someone working 55 hours a week.

Mathis noted this research clearly indicated that as fatigue increases, so do poor decision making and the occurrence of work accidents — and relationships at work and with family often take the toll.

Hence, the need to remember balance. Yes, sometimes when the crop needs planted and the cows need to be bred, you’ll have long days. But find those weeks that allow for balance for yourself and your employees — you might just find, you are actually more productive.

Fewer people better, too

This mentality that less is more not only applies to the hours you work but should also be considered for the number of people on a project. If you serve on a committee, you likely know this concept well. Too many people assigned to complete a task often means it takes twice as long to get the task done.

Patrick Lencioni, a respected leader in the area of organizational health, addressed this idea in his *Inc.* magazine column. Lencioni provided an analogy that any farm or ranch family can appreciate: On a family farm, three cousins often enjoyed helping a grandfather with weekend projects. But whenever the three cousins wanted to work together, the grandfather would protest, saying, “One boy is a boy, two boys is half a boy and three boys ain’t no boy at all.”

Lencioni says the lesson is this, “Adding more people to a project does not necessarily make it better. And when it comes to creative problem solving, more people often does just the opposite.”

Rather, he advocates, “Throwing lots of people at a project seems smart — but creativity thrives in smaller groups.” Lencioni provided an example from his own company. With a staff of just 10, he felt it was taking the group too long to make decisions, to respond to challenges and to come up with new ideas during meetings, which usually included everyone. His solution was to break the staff into three functional groups: one focused on clients, another on content and another on operations. He says within days they were able to see new ideas develop and problems solved within the specific areas.

A farm or ranch could certainly take a similar approach — dividing employees to be responsible for different enterprises or different aspects of the operation: marketing, genetics, production/harvest.

Lencioni says not only has the more nimble arrangement for idea generation, problem solving and decision making made them more productive but a happy side effect has been that the company’s passion has been “reignited.” Employees are being allowed to pursue the areas that align with their interests, and they are being allowed to push past the status quo.

He adds that smaller groups can establish trusting relationships and they can engage in productive debate, which would require hours by a large group.

Lencioni calls it “small group innovation.” He adds, “I’ve seen it again and again in my consulting: Most teams are too large to be innovative.” He believes more than five is probably too many. **HW**