

ON GETTING THINGS DONE...

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In his 1936 self help classic “How to Win Friends and Influence People”, Dale Carnegie speaks of the 85-15 rule. Being, 15% of human success is due to technical knowledge while 85% of success stems from our skill in “human engineering, personality and the ability to lead people.” Humor me and assume this to be true, and then let us explore success as it pertains to our rangelands and ranching operations.

The term “success” means different things to different folks but I think we can all agree, success is a fleeting mistress. Often, aiming for success is like leading a moving target and hoping for a bull’s-eye. With this in mind let me propose we consider ourselves successful if we are moving forward towards our individual or collective long term goals. To me, one of the greatest impingements to my daily success is my tendency to get bogged down in a routine and lose sight of the big picture. General George Patton said, “When a unit is caught in a barrage the surest way to get out of it is to go forward - fast.” By doing this the enemy tends to over shoot your position. Let’s think about that for a minute. What do we do when we get hit with obstacles, whether they are conflict, challenges, or maybe just a bad day? Personally, I hunker down. Patton, however, would disagree “...the psychological effect (of digging in) on the soldier is bad – digging trenches makes the soldier think the enemy is dangerous, which he usually is not.” I have made a conscious effort to meet life moving forward and to not let adversaries or problems become more dangerous than they are, or really need to be. By doing so, I feel I am successful.

Once we have defined success, let us look into applying it to Carnegie’s 15-85 theory. As I sit here in my little corner of the world, I find myself surrounded by snapshots taken over the years. Photos of country I have worked in and people who have shared my life. One striking commonality in nearly all these photos, other than the obvious horse, is the variety of dogs I have known over the years. Now, I am not much of a dog hand and have been blessed with only a couple exceptional stock dogs. Most of my dogs have been mutts of questionable ability, doing a marginal amount of work, but as such were surprisingly well compensated for their services. I have often wondered why? May I submit that much of the dog’s well being stems from his ability to convey a sincere interest in those around him? Could we each learn something from this? I have also heard, and believe to be true, that “the deepest urge in human nature is the desire to be important.” The dog, through his sincerity and interest fulfills this basic human need. Generally it is our fellow humans who do not realize how important it is for us to have a feeling of importance. We all feel we deserve respect and generally get pretty put out when we feel slighted or our ego gets a bit bruised. This is simply human nature, however, so is the ability to realize how this affects us each individually so that we may begin to use these tendencies in a way that empowers us to become a positive force in our industry. Maybe our humble stock dog knows a touch more about human nature than we do; we could learn a great lesson from him.

Several years ago when the Sage grouse thing was just getting started, I received a draft copy of the habitat guidelines from my BLM range con. Boy, I went thru the roof! All I could see was more regulation, more rules, and more problems. After several days spent grinding the enamel off my molars I thought about taking another look, from a different perspective. This time around I saw the optimal canopy cover of sagebrush and the diversity of grasses and forbs in the understory thru the eyes of a

chicken. The fascinating thing that also came into view was GREAT cow country! In the back of my mind I thought; "My, my, Coombs, if there were a way to get your ranges in THIS condition both your breed back and weaning weights would go up – significantly." Suddenly I had commonality with the "adversary" or at least was in a position to realize it. At that moment I made a movement forward and the "enemy" ceased being dangerous and actually in many ways became an ally. The commonality had always been there but we had all spent so much time and energy focusing on the 20% of the guidelines we disagreed with, that all of us were ignoring the 80% that would benefit most everyone. With time and effort it has become easier for me to focus on common ground. Now, in no way am I insinuating that we compromise our principles. When you run across a hill that is worth dying on then that is what you need to do. What I am proposing is somewhat akin to MacArthur's island hopping campaign in the Pacific during the Second World War. Maybe, instead of hunting the hills to die on (there are lots of them out there) we could ease around them and allow them to wither on their own accord. Some won't, but many will. This is basically a form of positive reinforcement and works all over the ranch. When the four year old is demanding to wear polka-dots with plaid maybe the fact that she ate the broccoli could be the focus instead of a frontal attack on polka-dot hill. Is dealing with the irrigator, cowboy or the tax man much different?

Now that we have all mastered human nature and can be considered man's best friend lets visit about another critical element in getting things done on our ranges. At its most basic level, action starts with awareness. Awareness is a commonly used term that upon some additional thought is a really strong word. Essentially our life experience can be broken down to simply - awareness. Depak Chopra describes awareness in the eastern tradition as follows, "Awareness acts like an invisible force – it moves energy while seeming to do nothing." Most of us don't spend a lot of time pondering the cultural traditions of India, so how does this apply to me? Let me try to explain. I believe one of the greatest lessons I learned at my chosen institution of higher learning took place on a spring morning when an underappreciated teaching assistant loaded eight or 10 of us into a university van and proceeded to kick us out at the mouth of a little canyon with the following instructions. "Walk around and figure out what happened here in the past." Soon after I had somewhat of an epiphany: if I could become truly aware of the past as well as the current use and tradition of the landscape I could better arm myself with the tools I would need to sustain myself and my family on that land. It is somewhat akin to sifting bulls or horses ahead of a sale. You try to become acutely aware of the subject at hand and attempt to make an objective judgment based on past experience, the current condition or feel, and the future hopes for the animal. The concept is not new, only applied differently and consciously. Try me; spend as much energy becoming aware of your country (sifting it) as you do your livestock purchases. You will be amazed at the changes that will occur on the land based on that awareness.

I have attempted to bring up three points here pertaining to getting things done. If I were to prioritize them, I would as follows. First and foremost, it is about people. If one ever hopes for long term success he or she must learn how to get along, compromise and focus on commonality with a diverse array of people. In my mind this is the most valuable skill we can master in our society today. Second is awareness. Awareness provides us with the willingness to see a need and begins action. Third is the need for action or forward movement; to be persistent and deliberate in finding a way toward our goal.

Pearl Buck once said, "The young do not know enough to be prudent and therefore attempt the impossible ... and achieve it, generation after generation." May we never learn enough to be prudent and always attempt the impossible.