

Management Update

Critical Thinking *By: John Winder*

I'm sure you have heard it said that we all have 20:20 hindsight. We have all wished that we could go back and correct mistakes. But what about the future? How can we avoid making mistakes tomorrow, next week, next year? In our current business climate, it is very difficult to avoid mistakes. We are constantly bombarded with information. Some is accurate and valid, some is misleading, and some is deceptive or outright fraudulent. If we are to avoid mistakes, we must learn to evaluate all activities in a critical fashion.

Critical thinking is not inherited. It is acquired. Without exception, every good manager I have known was a good critical thinker. They learn to separate fact from fiction. Their decisions are based on information instead of emotion. They are never pressured into buying or doing anything. They act after carefully evaluating the consequences and benefits of every management decision. They do not necessarily know all of the answers, but they know where to look and whom to ask.

Critical thinking requires discipline. You must learn to resist peer pressure and salesmanship. You need to learn to ask questions and gather information. You must develop relationships with people who can help you evaluate your options. Even after this is done, you must realize that you can still be fooled. You must constantly re-evaluate your decision. Let's consider an example.

A salesman contacts you. He is selling a new range supplement. He tells you that you can winter your cows for less money if you buy this feed. How do you evaluate the product? The obvious first step is to consider the evidence as presented. Ask why it will reduce wintering costs. Ask for a flier and an ingredient list. Ask the salesman to provide you with documentation of expected results. Is the documentation based on controlled research or just testimonials?

If you are uncomfortable with your ability to evaluate the product, contact an unbiased expert (extension specialist, consultant, etc.). Okay, let's assume that you decide to use the feed. Continue to be critical. Consider anything that could cause a bias in your evaluation. Consider the quality of other feedstuffs that are available to the animals (range, grass, hay, etc.). A poor supplement may look good if fed along with high quality hay. The opposite may be true if fed with low quality forage. Finally, assess your outcome. Base future decisions on what you have learned.

This seems to be the era of sound bites and perception over substance. In such a world, critical thinking can be a businessman's greatest asset. ■