

Taking the wheel of your future

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Abstract

This presentation is an outline of how I got to where I am with a few pointers I have learned and help me every day. I grew up on a small farm in south-central Kansas. I knew I wanted to work in a feedyard, but wasn't exactly sure in what capacity. I attended Kansas State University upon high school graduation, and pursued a degree in animal science, again, no idea what I was going to do. I was lucky enough with my grades that I was afforded the opportunity to join the Honors program and conduct a research trial on cattle. It was extra work, but I quickly learned that I like research and answering production-related questions.

Key words: veterinary practice, careers

Résumé

Cette présentation donne les grandes lignes de mon parcours jusqu'à ce jour de même que certaines connaissances que j'ai acquises et qui m'ont aidé chaque jour. J'ai grandi dans une petite ferme du centre-sud du Kansas. Je savais que je voulais travailler dans un parc d'engraissement mais je n'étais pas certain à quel titre. Je suis allé à l'université d'état du Kansas à la fin de mes études secondaires et j'ai fait des études en sciences animales sans trop encore savoir ce que j'allais faire. Mes notes étant suffisamment bonnes, j'ai eu la chance de joindre le programme d'excellence et de mener un essai clinique avec des bovins. Bien que cela représentait du travail supplémentaire, j'ai rapidement compris que j'aimais la recherche et répondre à des questions en lien avec la production.

Pointer #1. Try new things. If you are like me and were raised in a very small corner of the world, you will never know what else is out there if you don't.

At that point, I elected to pursue a degree in ruminant nutrition. Two days after our wedding, my wife and I moved 800 miles away from everything and everyone we knew. It was scary, but ended up being a terrific opportunity for us to build our marriage as well as jump-start our careers.

Pointer #2. Don't be afraid of taking chances (if you have some direction).

After a short year and 9 months, we moved back to Kansas. I continued my education pursuing a PhD in the cattle health and nutrition field. My supervising professor worked in the veterinary school at Kansas State, so I worked around a bunch of vets. A couple of them you may know, Mike Apley

and Dan Thomson, who were both former feedlot consultants. Their comment to me was "Why don't you go to vet school and really broaden your horizons in the feedlot world?" To which I responded, "Cause I don't want to be a vet."

Pointer #3. Never close doors or burn bridges.

After a lot of convincing and long nights of thought, I applied and was fortunate enough to be accepted to the program. I finished up my PhD in the first couple of years of vet school. The fall semester of the second year was a test of my wits. During that semester I had my PhD preliminary exam, we had our second child, I had the vet classes with all of the ".ologies" (pathology, parasitology, bacteriology, and pharmacology), and then I had to defend my dissertation and graduate. I got through it and had a much different perspective on the world than many of my classmates.

Pointer #4. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Prioritize, make a plan, execute the plan. Anything is possible.

After second year, I spent a summer working in a feedyard and that sealed the deal—that was the place for me. The problem was several of my mentors and other veterinarians I talked to didn't think I could become a feedlot consultant right out of vet school. Here are a couple stories:

Anecdote 1. I attended a student-practitioner session where round-robin interviews (3 to 5 min.) were conducted. One that is cemented in my mind was a practitioner that told me lots of vets would like to do just beef cattle, but that wasn't possible if you lived where you wanted to. It wouldn't pay the bills, had to have companion animal component. That was disheartening, but I moved on.

Anecdote 2. I was in my last year of vet school and had an off-week around the holidays. An active consultant at the time agreed to meet me in a feedyard in northern Colorado. I drove through the night to be there on time and reduce cost. I got there only to find out that he changed his visit and didn't tell me. Soooo, I got a tour of the feedyard and met the personnel. I called the consultant, who apologized, and I discussed the possibility of joining his practice. I was told to become a mixed practitioner because it wasn't possible to become a feedlot consultant right out of vet school. As fate would have it, that feedyard is now one of my accounts.

Pointer #5. Mentors and others you look up to need to be listened to and their advice heeded. However, you are the one that lives your life. Do what you want to do, but "you"

includes your family. It is impossible to be successful if things are bad at home.

After being brow-beaten about my plan to be a feedlot consultant, I started my job search and included rural mixed practices. I had a couple good scenarios to pursue, but I noticed a posting for a staff veterinarian for a large cattle feeding company in the fall of my last year. I decided to give it a shot. I got an interview, got a second interview, and a few months later I had the job.

Pointer #6. You will never achieve a goal that you don't put the effort towards it.

I graduated in May of 2010, and was then in charge of overseeing the health and well-being of over 900,000 cattle. In the first few months, I thought the people advising me to become a traditional practitioner may have been right. I had to really lean on peers, but had some great feedyard managers to work with and great animal health crews at the feedyards. The interaction with the people of production agriculture is truly what I enjoy every day. It requires me to take more complicated subjects and teach them in a way they can understand.

Pointer #7. "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." – Albert Einstein

After a few months on the job, I got my confidence up and started to feel like I was making a difference. Obviously, there were rough spots. There was 1 feedlot manager in particular that was crucial in my training. He and I had some real knock-down drag-outs, but we were both the better for it. Today this manager oversees 4 large feedyards and are clients of my practice.

Pointer #8. Don't be scared of conflict. It generates respect. "Those who avoid confrontation at all cost, are preserving the very problems they wish would go away." – cultureconscience.com

For the next 4 years I was on cruise control in that position. The company was growing, I enjoyed the people I worked with, and loved the job I was doing. Life was good. As I matured in the position and learned more about the culture of the company, there were some things that bothered me at a much higher level, beyond my day-to-day activities. There were a lot of changes being made and some things that troubled me. About that time, an offer to purchase a consulting practice presented itself. After a lot of discussion with my wife, some sleepless nights, some discussions with mentors, etc... we made the jump, and things have been going great ever since.

Pointer #9. "If you are unhappy with your situation, you are the only one that can change it. Nobody else can change it for you." – Mandy Fox

As I reflect on the 8 years of my veterinary career and 38 years of my life, I have to continually remind myself how fortunate I am to be surrounded by great people at home, at work, and at play. I have great colleagues, great friends, and an awesome family. I live exactly where I want to and do the job I had dreamed about because I wouldn't let others talk me out of it. If there is 1 more piece of advice, I think it would be to try every day to be a good person that other people want to be around.

Pointer #10. Be nice, be encouraging, and mind your manners. Don't let it show when you are having a bad day. And, answer the phone (or promptly return the call). It is so annoying when people don't do that. If you send it to voicemail it is one more thing you must do later and then you end up in phone tag and yada, yada, yada.

Thanks for this opportunity!