Notes and Quotes: Some Thoughts and Observations on Succeeding in Today’s Agriculture
by Danny Klinefelter

Most of my career, in industry and academia, has been spent studying the differences between successful, average and unsuccessful farm and ranch managers. Over the years I have known successful part-time producers with full-time off-farm jobs, mid-sized producers who succeeded by superior management skills, and successful large scale producers who were outstanding entrepreneurs and executives by any industry standards.

While numerous books have been written about the subject and there are an endless number of cliches' which attempt to capture the essence of successful management in a few words, it's pretty clear that there isn't one all encompassing set of attributes or criteria. At the same time, I have always found it interesting and enlightening to study quotes that capture at least some of the key elements. Those listed below include some of my own observations as well as some of my favorite quotes from Peta Alexander, Jim Collins, Peter Drucker, Wayne Gretsky, Tom Peters, Mark Twain, and Jack Welch. They obviously reflect my personal biases; but, I hope you will find them insightful as well as thought provoking.

1. The future will always belong to those who see the possibilities before they become obvious.

2. Wayne Gretsky was once asked by a reporter what he thought accounted for his success. He recognized that he wasn’t bigger, stronger or faster than most of the people he played against. Gretsky believed that what made the biggest difference was that most players were always going where the puck was, while he always tried to go where it was going to be.

3. It’s all about the difference between doing the right things versus doing things right. A lot of failures have been businesses or organizations who were doing something very well, but that were no longer relevant or what the market rewarded.

4. There is an old saying “if it isn’t broke...don’t fix it.” However, Tom Peters in his book Thriving on Chaos argues, “If it isn’t broke...you probably haven’t looked hard enough!”

5. In business, the only truly sustainable competitive advantage is the ability to learn and adapt faster than your competition.

6. Too many people tend to change only when they feel the heat, rather than because they see the light.

7. The best companies spend as much time analyzing what to stop doing as they do analyzing new opportunities.

8. The main difference between the top 10% and rest of the top 25% is their timing.

9. To remain successful, a business needs to be a learning organization. That means everyone in the business needs to recognize that someone, somewhere, has a better idea or way of doing things and they need to be compelled to find it, learn it, adapt it and continually improve it.
10. When the rate of change inside a business becomes slower than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight. The only question is when.

11. Two comments I frequently hear are that most farmers and ranchers run their businesses more as producers than as business managers, and they are resistant to change. From my experience, most farmers don’t see either statement being directly applicable to them personally. Most believe they are managing their farm as a business. The question should really be: Are they using the best business management practices and do they possess the necessary management skills and attributes to compete with the best in the business? Almost every farmer also believes he has made significant changes in his business. The real issue is: Are they moving forward as fast as their leading edge competitors - the top 10%?

As an analogy, consider two people driving the same direction on an interstate highway. Both are clearly changing - i.e., moving forward. However, one is traveling 55 mph and the other 70 mph. If they both drive 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, at the end of one year the one going 70 mph will be 31,200 miles ahead of the other. But what if the 70 mph driver decided to ramp things up to do business 24/7/365? If the 55 mph driver stayed on his current pace he would now be falling behind by 498,800 miles per year. Assuming the highway circumnavigated the earth, the slower driver would be getting lapped about 20 times a year.

Is this example extreme? Yes. Is it unrealistic? No. Large commercial dairies typically milk around the clock, 365 days a year. In another instance, one row crop operator I know now farms in 15 states so he can diversify production and market risks in addition to utilizing his labor, management and equipment nine-ten months a year rather than the normal single-site planting and harvesting periods.

12. Remember, the future hall of fame baseball player with a .300 lifetime batting average gets only 1 more hit in every 20 times at bat than the player who hits .250 and just manages to hang on.

13. It’s not what you don’t know that bothers me, it’s what you do know that just ain’t so.

14. One of my biggest frustrations in explaining business concepts are people who have to have things put in terms of their enterprise, geographic area or industry before they can see how it applies to their situation. Someday they’ll either be out of business or working for someone else, because they’re always going to be two steps behind the leader.

15. It is not a comment that is very politically correct, but flying with the eagles and not scratching with the turkeys is a very real issue in any business. Make sure you are seeking out and interacting with successful people in your industry and not hanging out with the losers - this is essential for stimulation, motivation, and personal growth. Successful people challenge you and force you to think, they cause you to consider alternatives and they inspire you. Losers tend to be victims. Everything that goes wrong is someone else’s fault. They’re jealous of success, they’re tradition bound, they can’t see alternatives, and they drag you down to their level.

16. Remember, Darwin didn’t actually say it was the survival of the fittest, what he said was that it’s not the fastest, strongest or smartest who survives, it’s those that are able to adapt to change.