Victimism Can Be a Crippling Disease
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Our market-oriented economy is based on competition. We tend to admire winners and aspire to succeed. Over the years, I have known successful part-time producers with full-time off-farm jobs, mid-sized producers who have succeeded by superior management skills, and successful large scale producers who are outstanding entrepreneurs and executives by any industry standards.

Unfortunately, the success of some has resulted from monopolistic competition and unethical or illegal practices. Where these situations exist, it is our duty to stand up, speak out and take action. But our response needs to be based on facts and not on conjecture or emotions.

There is another problem in agriculture, however, that I think is equally insidious. It’s like a cancer that attacks and eats away at the healthy part of the industry. The trouble is there doesn’t seem to be any politically correct way to address it. And that is the “I am a victim mentality” characterizing a minority but still a significant number of agricultural producers. These are the people who like to blame their problems or lack of success on anything or anyone but themselves. They frequently can’t see their own faults, and even when they do, they usually aren’t doing anything significantly to change the way they manage their business.

This group somehow seems to feel that the most effective way to deal with the winners is to bad mouth them to try to bring them down to their level rather than doing what they can to raise their own level of performance. Unfortunately, there isn’t a vaccine to treat envy or resentment.

The problem is compounded over time because those suffering from Victimism tend to invest too little into trying to change the things they can. They may work harder and worry more; but, they generally keep using the same approaches to management and business models that they always have. Too much of what could be productive time and energy are dissipated in periods of depression or wasted on the senseless venting of their frustrations. In today’s world, the key to success generally lies not in working harder but in working smarter.

It is also true that everyone isn’t blessed with the same management skills and abilities. It’s not so much a matter of superior intelligence. Rather the differences frequently lie in creativity, sense of timing, risk management psychology, and the ability to see the big picture and how things fit together.
We all have a tendency to want blame our circumstances on forces beyond our control. But, again and again studies have shown that over the same time period, in the same area and producing the same commodities some producers are making money while others are losing it. Just as examples, the New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas Standardized Performance Analysis results for commercial cow-calf producers over the period 2003-2007 found that the top 25 percent of producers were generating $177.93 net income per cow, while the bottom 25 percent were losing $188.21 per cow. A 5-year study of Illinois Farm Business Farm Management Association in the 1990s found that the most profitable one-third of central Illinois crop farmers netted on average $97 more per acre than the least profitable one-third, even though the farms compared had similar soil types and were raising the same crops. A similar study in Kansas about 10 years later found almost exactly the same thing. Year to year, the uncontrollables can play havoc; but, over time the winners are those who do a better job of managing the business.

I have known literally hundreds of top managers who have turned down the opportunity to share valuable knowledge, insights and management practices in the farm press, not to protect a competitive advantage; but, because they feared the petty reaction of some people in their local community who would see the story as a form of self aggrandizement. The result is that a lot of valuable information is never shared.

Many of the victim mentality producers loudly profess a belief in free enterprise and self reliance; but, they often espouse beliefs and solutions that are really more socialist in nature. They’re a lot like the pro basketball player who says I play the same game and work just as hard; therefore, I should be paid the same as Michael Jordan.

Fortunately – the future of agriculture lies with those producers who overcome bad weather, bad prices and bad luck largely by being better managers.