

The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers

9th – 15th January 2011

David Cussons

Supported by the Lorna and Bert Kelly Memorial Award and CSBP

The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP) is run in Austin, Texas annually by Texas A&M University. The aim is to “accelerate knowledge and understanding of today’s complex Agri-Business issues.” Having attended the 2011 edition of the course, I can say they very much achieve their aim.

TEPAP is run over seven days and includes 11 different presenters and 39 hours of lectures plus nightly roundtable discussions.

The subject matter is strongly focused on business management and strategy, which was what attracted me to the course in the first place. Topics (with my highlights expanded upon) included:

- **Family Business Management**

Don Jonovic focused on the most effective ways to structure family businesses for success, mainly from a human resources point of view, covering topics such as family member roles, investment (financial and other) vs return, farm advisory boards, decision making, family meetings, family codes of conduct, setting and meeting family/business objectives, dealing with the older generation (particularly the ‘semi-retired’ father), the place of in-laws in the family farm, introducing new family members to the business, farm and business legacy. Given the vast majority of my Nuffield Group Travel colleagues were/are experiencing succession issues in their family business, the value of this topic for farmers is immense.

- **Financial Management**

- **Macroeconomics: Impacts on Farm Level Decision Making**

Ed Seifried (Dr Ed) took the class through key economic indicators which have an important influence on farm management. Some ratios we were told to monitor include the ISM Manufacturing Index (PMI), Industrial Production Index, Retail and Food Service Sales and the oil price. Time to subscribe to the Australian Financial Review! Perhaps this is a perfect example of how while some US figures and ratios were used in this class, the principles hold for farmers from right around the world.

- **Delegation: Turning Art into a Science**

- **Megatrends**

- **Understanding and Working with Different Personalities**

Gary Maas gave the class a ‘DISC’ personality test which caused great interest amongst the group. ‘DISC’ stands for four style categories of Dominant, Influencing, Steady and Compliant (in case you’re wondering, I was split between Influencing and Steady). I believe generally farmers are very good at managing farms and businesses but often are not as strong on people management. This topic helps enormously in understanding what makes other people think and behave the way they do, and how to get the most out of them.

- **Human Resources Management**

- **Process Improvement**

- **Strategic Management**

Allan Gray looked at business strategy – particularly competitive strategy and how to position your business to best succeed. He discussed the power of buyers and customers (particularly interesting for farmers!), threats of substitute products or services, industry competitive environment and the power of suppliers. He also discussed anticipating and exploiting change and the importance of internal business analysis. Perhaps the most important issue was that of business strategic position and the question ‘*where will my farm focus its resources and its passion?*’ – something I believe many farmers never stop and consider.

- **Market Growth Strategies**

- **Public Relations Plans: What, Why and How**

I went to TEPAP hoping that there would be a strong focus on business management and strategy, and that the information delivered would be relevant for an Australian farmer. Happily, the answer to both those questions was a resounding ‘yes’. As a result of TEPAP Unit I, there are a number of things I have brought back to our farm in Western Australia to improve our business, including many of the topics I expanded on above. Much, if not all, the subject matter is also relevant for off-farm businesses. While on occasion the subject matter did become a little north American-centric, there were always principles which I could relate back to Australia, or at least something which made me think.

On a personal level, I very much enjoyed networking with 84 other course participants from all over the USA and involved in agriculture at various levels. Such was the range of businesses involved, the gross revenue of operations ranged from \$360 thousand to over \$500 million! I am a big believer in the value of networking, and made some good contacts in Unit I, relationships which will be built on should I attend Unit II.

I strongly recommend continuing the Kelly Family bursary to allow a Nuffield Scholar to continue attending TEPAP Unit I if possible. I believe there is great value to the scholar personally, to their business, to Nuffield Australia for promotion and to other TEPAP attendees who get the international perspective from a visiting Nuffield scholar.

I would like to sincerely thank the Kelly Family, CSBP (particularly Darryl Dent), Nuffield Australia and my supportive family for the wonderful opportunity of attending TEPAP.

David Cussons, February 2011