

The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers: Austin Texas January 2013

In January this year I was fortunate to receive the opportunity to participate in the Executive Programme for Agricultural Producers facilitated annually by Texas A&M University with thanks to the Lorna and Bert Kelly Memorial Award who sponsored the course cost and Jetset Travel Griffith who supported my travel.

The course offers a unique opportunity not only to hear from some of the foremost agricultural business advisers in the U.S.A but also to share the learning's and experiences with a vast number of high-end producers operating across a broad range of agricultural enterprises.

Having had experience in agri-business courses in Australia and New Zealand what set this programme apart was the large amount talent assembled in one room, while both humbling and stimulating it gave me the opportunity to find sound advice from producers in similar operations or stages of business development. This not only prompted great discussion but also helped galvanise the learning's provided by such a deep and informative course content. The course held of 7 days consisted of a series of presentations and interactions in a class room environment with roundtable discussions held at the end of every day, having all the participants staying at the one location enabled the interactions and discussions to continue into the night, around breakfast, lunch, dinner and even post course through social media.

Highlights of the course:

Financial Management: Dick Wittman's explanation of basic financial analysis comes from someone not only highly skilled in financial accounting but also as an agricultural producer who has first-hand experience in implementation and driving forward of these concepts. Although there are obvious differences in taxation and reporting in the U.S to Australia, the fundamentals do change a great deal with respect to sound financial positioning and the ratios needed to make good decisions in operating a business. What I found of particular interest is the use of economic and financial modelling needed in the area of process improvement; this is of great importance in agricultural production when innovation and investment are the keys to profitability.

Family Business Management: Donald Jonovic gave a humorous and insightful look at family business in agriculture, the challenges and issues are unsurprisingly similar both here and the U.S and the solutions equally as complex. However to me he reinforced the basic fundamental of planning and communication as the key to success.

Strategic Management: Allen Gray provided an insight into the need to understand how your business is situated in the supply chain and the need to focus on competitive advantage. Many of the course participants gave me the impression that their strategic direction was something beyond their control and prompted many vigorous debates. It did make me realise the need for business to ask itself does it enjoy what it what it's doing and how to position itself so it can continue to do so.

Megatrends: While macroeconomics is something well out of most of our sphere of control it is however fascinating and frightening when put out in terms of the near future. The challenges and changes that descending upon us are enormous and to be aware of this is

vital in seeing our place in the world. David Khol would be one of the most engaging speakers you could wish to hear, keeping us all riveted to his views and thus causing the greatest level of discussion amongst the group.

Human Resources and working with different personalities: While the course content was competently presented by Bernie Erven and Barb Dartt the concepts in these fields are fairly universal and always give cause for consideration. However I found most people doing the course are very self-aware and have applied many of these concepts in their business life and the course offered a opportunity to refresh and revise these areas.

Public Relations: Maurice Russell prompted a great deal of interest in how businesses should look at how we operate in today's world of lobby groups, media and social impact. The American farmers struggle with out-side groups is similar to that of our own here in Australia, case studies and strategies really got participants fired up and was exciting to be involved with. What was striking was the polarisation of views when the subject of unconventional gas extraction was presented; this was amazingly similar to what would be found in Australian farmers view. Another issue to cause great consternation was the subject of animal rights groups and the reality of "the invisible hand wiping animal production from the face of the earth" , a concept fast becoming a challenge both sides of the world.

Danny Klinefelter concluded the course with a genuine interest in what the participants though about the subject matter and how it was presented. He has an amazing passion for production agriculture and this was evident throughout the duration of the programme. Past graduates also gave their accounts of how the programme has launched their own operations to another level and were more than happy to continue an association with other past participants and presenters.

It was a privilege to be involved in this programme and I highly recommend it to anyone wishing to broaden their knowledge of the industry they are involved in and to the direction needed to be taken for future success.

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