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Contact: Doc or Patricia Spitzer
info@srbulls.com or
(864)972-9140 or (864)710-0257

Critical Thinking For Beef Cattle Production Systems – Part 3 Problem Solving

Over the past months we discussed Critical Thinking and why every economically successful beef producer is a **disciplined critical thinker**. If you missed “Critical Thinking For Beef Cattle Production Systems, Parts 1 and 2, the Spitzer’s would be happy to send you copies or they can be viewed at www.srbulls.com. Additional contact information for Spitzer Ranch is available at the end of this article.

“Critical thinking requires the judicious use of skepticism, tempered by experience, such that it is productive of a more satisfactory solution, or insight into the problem at hand”, Dr. J. E. McPeck. As humans we all wish we could go back and correct mistakes, sometimes costly mistakes! But, that’s done and gone and reducing the likelihood of future mistakes is what’s important. Solving real problems through critical thinking is how we avoid making mistakes tomorrow, next week and next year. Problem solving is also a learned skill and ranchers who are solid critical thinkers may not always be great problem solvers, but successful problem solvers are always outstanding critical thinkers. Many business experts break problem solving into the five parts of *identifying* the problem, *defining* the problem, *evaluating* the problem, *solving* the problem and *monitoring success*.

Problem Identification – Obviously the first step, but not always as simple as it seems. A problem may be as obvious as a dead calf or as hidden as a few less cows pregnant, increased production cost or lost opportunity. It’s important to not let the obvious problems overshadow your evaluation of the more subtle problems which, in fact, may be more of a drag on profit.

{We will use an example of “dead calves at birth” as we get further along in this discussion.}

Problem Definition – Seems easy and yet years of experience indicate many unresolved problems are the result of not correctly defining the problem in the first place. Exactly what is the nature and scope of the problem? Let's get to our example. Joe Farmer calved a few over a 100 cows this spring and 10 calves were dead at birth (DAB) or died at, or shortly after calving. Seven of these ten calves required assistance at birth and still died. The obvious **Problem Identification** is: dead calves. But the subtle problems are also increased labor and expense, weak calves that lived, but were slow to nurse and grew slower than they should; and cows that were either open or calved late due to trauma to their reproductive tract even if they were not assisted at calving. Defining the exact problem is harder in this case, but let's define that all possible disease problems as well as poisons have been ruled out, cows were not obese and we have exhausted our list of possibilities other than calves are just too darn big. In fact, weights were recorded on the dead calves assisted at birth. Of the 7 calves requiring assistance, 6 were born to first-calf-cows and those 6 calves weighed from 85 to 100 pounds and the 1 calf from a mature cow weighed 105 pounds. **Problem Definition** is: calves genetically too big.

Problem Evaluation – Some problems are very simple and have solutions that are easy to identify and implement. However, others are extremely complex and do not respond to quick and simple solutions. If we attempt to solve these complex problems with quick and simple solutions we run the risk of being wrong and making very costly mistakes. In this example, the entire cow herd was multi-sire exposed to five bulls in one group. Cows were all fairly uniform two-breed-crossbred cows calving with BCS of 5 and on an excellent health and management program. Therefore our **Problem Evaluation** is: a bull (or bulls) sire "too big" calves.

Problem Solution - Joe Farmer's first simple solution was to cull all five of his recently purchased performance tested bulls for which he had spent \$4000 to \$6000. Simple solution, but probably far from the best one from a cost standpoint. Mr. Farmer's second simple solution was

to cull the three bulls with actual birth weight (BW) greater than 90 pounds (one was 90, one 93 and one 95). BUT, are actual BW the best predictor of genetics for the BW of a bull's calves. The answer is emphatically no, BW EPD accounts for a bulls actual BW, but additionally the contemporary group in which he was born and the genetics of all his relatives which arrives at a more accurate predictor of his "genetic birth weight". In this example the 93 pound actual BW bull had a BW EPD in the lowest Top 15% of the breed and the 95 pound actual BW bull had a BW EPD in the lowest Top 40% of the breed, but the 90 pound actual BW bull had a BW EPD in the Top 80% of the breed. (By definition a bull in the Top 80% only has 20% of the entire breed with a BW EPD heavier than his.) In this case we were lucky as blood was collected on all 10 of the dead calves to do disease diagnostics so DNA was available to determine parentage. Nine of the 10 dead calves were sired by the 90 pound actual BW bull with the BW EPD in the Top 80%. He was the cause of almost all of the dead calves. **Problem Solution** is: culling only that one bull which was not exactly the simple solution, but it was the cost effective solution.

Monitoring Success - No problem solving activity is complete without some methodology to measure results. The folks at Spitzer Ranch are fanatical about record keeping and publish some forty different data points on every bull in their sale catalog. And they have those measurements plus additional metrics on their brood cows. That being said the most useless records kept are those that are meaningless or are time-wasters in commercial cow herds. **Monitoring Success** is: the recommendations for Joe Farmer's commercial cow herd were to take birthweights on all calves born to all First-Calf-Cows as well as any calf born dead and those that "appeared larger than average" on calves born to mature cows. Except under unusual management situations, the bulls you purchase will almost always determine your rates of calving problems and percentage of dead calves in your commercial cow herd. Therefore, taking birthweights on every calf born to a commercial cow does not add much information that will

generate more profit for you, the commercial beef producer. A further recommendation is to be aware of the Percentile Rank for BW EPD on all purchased bulls as well as some idea of birth weight to see if that makes sense. To be flagged as a CALVING EASE BULL for use to breed first time females in the Spitzer Ranch program means they had an actual (weighed, not guessed) birth weight of less than 80 pounds and are in the Top 50% Rank for lower BW EPDs.

Now if you are a critical thinking problem solver you probably do not mentally go through the five steps of *identification, definition, evaluation, solving and monitoring success*. But, you have subconsciously trained your mind to do so. For some of us these steps need to be learned. Learn them. The exercise will make you a better manager, prevent needless costly mistakes and in the end make you more profitable.

The Spitzer family invites you to their twenty third annual **BULL SALE** scheduled for **Saturday, February 27, 2016**. Their **Summer Newsletter** was mailed in mid-September and copies are still available. If you wish your name added to their mailing list call 864/972-9140, send a note to their **NEW EMAIL ADDRESS** (info@srbulls.com) or write SPITZER RANCH, 1511 HWY 59, Fair Play, SC, 29643. In the summer newsletter was a Bull Test Performance Report to date for those bulls being developed for the 2016 bull sale. Additionally they always include educational tips, inspiration and insights into a variety of timely topics of interest to those cattlemen whose goal is increased profitability. The SPITZER RANCH Facebook page has exploded with “Likes” and there are now some 1830+ followers of their posts and QUOTE OF THE WEEK. For the most current information about the Spitzer Ranch Program and the Annual February Bull Sale be sure to visit their WEB SITE at www.srbulls.com.

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