

Learning and Competitive Advantage

Most business operator would agree that it's getting tougher out there— every day. It doesn't matter whether it's the local grocery store, a machinery dealer, or your own farm operation— an environment of continuous change and turmoil is making it harder and harder to compete and succeed in business.

Nevertheless, many businesses and farm operations are not only competing, they are thriving! The logical question is, how do they do it? What is it that enables one business to prosper while so many other remain in a state of constant struggle and difficulty?

The usual answers to this question focus on the basics of good business operation including attention to detail, keeping a close eye on costs, maximizing output, managing people, etc. While these and many other characteristics of successful businesses are important in maintaining competitive advantage, there appears to be one key element that serves as the foundation for them all.

Getting results in a rapidly changing world. Arie De Geus, head of planning for Royal Dutch/Shell once said, "*The ability to learn faster than your competitors, may be the only sustainable competitive advantage in the future.*"

This brief statement says a lot about the world we live in

today. Let's look more closely at three words contained in Mr. De Geus's quote.

1. Learning: When you look around, what do you see that is different about the successful organizations that you do business with? What is unique about those people from whom you buy the majority of your farm products and services? And, (as you look up and down the road) what common thread do you see among those farms that seem to be moving ahead, reaching their goals and enjoying life in the process?

I'll bet the one common attribute you see within all of these organizations and people is that they are committed to continuous growth and learning. They are the ones who are always reading, attending conferences, and "picking the brains" of others. They are *learning more, learning faster, and applying it better* than others who may not be doing so well.

2. Competition: For a dairy or beef producer, competition comes in several different forms. Who are your competitors? Do they include those who make imitation or substitute products? Are they the lobbying or regulatory groups who influence the way you farm? Or, is it possible that your competition might even be your neighbor or producers halfway

around the world who have learned how to produce a better quality product at a lower cost? Take a look at your competitors and ask yourself, "Are they doing a better job of learning and then applying what they learn, than I am?"

3. Advantage: People everywhere keep pushing the world to change. This occurs because they want better quality products and services. When people buy things, they want them delivered fast. They demand high quality and good value. We all expect convenience and flexibility with no hassle. If one supplier is unable or unwilling to deliver what we want, we will simply go somewhere else.

Those businesses and people who succeed, find out faster than their competitor what works or what works better. As a result, they learn how to gain and sustain competitive advantage.

Given the pace and volume of change, learning is the key to staying competitive for both individuals and organizations. The biggest challenge today is not *getting* an education, it's *keeping* one. We need to keep updating our knowledge throughout our entire working lives.

The good news is that there are more opportunities to learn than ever before. In fact, today

you don't even have to go to school to learn. School will come to you — through your computer, your television, and a variety of new tools, technologies and methods. Information has never been more plentiful. Knowledge has never been so accessible.

A Strategy for Learning—The ViSTA Model: While success in business calls for continual growth and development, most people don't have a plan to learn

At CRI, we have developed a special workshop that focuses on helping agri-business employee and producers to develop a plan for learning. The ViSTA Workshop outlines four steps in the development of a learning plan. These include *Vision, Strategy, Technology and Action*. The following provides a few highlights on each

1. Vision— Where am I heading? Periodically clarify what you want from your work and your life. A clear *vision* will improve the odds that you will move toward the future that you prefer. This involves continually asking yourself, “What’s changing? What are the internal and external forces that will impact the way we do business? What capabilities do I (we) now have? What capabilities will I (we) need in order to succeed in the future?”

2. Strategy— What is my plan for learning? “What are some work related and personal goals that I could establish and move toward? What are the benefits and payoffs of these goals? What are the obstacles that lie between my present situation and where I want to be in the future? What do I need to learn and do? What will be my *strategy* and plan for achieving my vision?” Remember: *planning makes your preferred future more probable.*

3. Technology— What are the tools, techniques and methods that I can use to learn? “Faster learning” does not mean hurried up. Faster learning requires simpler and more efficient ways to learn, fewer steps in the learning process, and more attention paid to application opportunities.

Ask yourself, “How have I learned in the past? What techniques have worked best? What is my preferred learning style? What new learning tools and techniques would I like to explore?”

Open yourself up to the new *technologies* that will alter the way you live and work. Learn how to use them. Embrace the forces of change.

4. Action— Get organized and get started! Leave the comfort zone that goes with merel

wishing for a better future. Take *action* and move toward your goals.

If you could create your own learning and action plan and knew that it would prepare you for the changes coming in the future, would you be willing to commit to such a plan? Are you ready to make the investment? For the ViSTA process to make a real difference, an emphasis has to be placed on *action*. Until learning is applied effectively, it is incomplete.

To succeed today, all businesses and their employees must continually reshape themselves, shift and flex to fit a rapidly changing world. They must adapt, adjust, and adopt new technologies and procedures.

Those who are succeeding, seem to have acquired the ability to learn throughout their lives. “*The organization that doesn't promote learning— especially fast learning— can't expect to compete successfully in the future.*” (Warren Bennis, Santa Monica, Ca.)

By Jim Henion
Director of Consulting Services
Cooperative Resources International, Inc.