

## **RISK TAKING ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS**

Ruby Award Address  
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"Nothing ventured-nothing gained."

"Fortune favors the bold but abandons the timid." "They are able because they THINK they are able." Nearly all ages and cultures have framed sayings and admonitions to encourage risk-taking...courageous action...and innovation. And yet **in** the next breath these same ages and cultures have seemed to counsel against it.

"Better safe, than. sorry".  
"Tried and True."

Or more humorously framed by Mark Twain: "Put all your eggs in one basket and WATCH THAT BASKET."

Risk-taking is absolutely essential to dealing with uncertainty. And yet...just stating that fact, creates tension and anxiety in the many, more comfortable with the fantasy of a certain world...a world that behaves within OUR control and predictions.

Certainty - uncertainty tug and pull can hold us in a grip that may both blind and paralyze us. I've long been fascinated with the idea that by improving our risk-taking ability we can create an improved tomorrow and also be free to enjoy the road to the future more intensely.

Robert Lewis Stevenson once wrote that, "Success is not a destination. It is a journey. To travel, hopefully, is a better thing than to arrive."

It is in this spirit that I would challenge each of you today to become a more proficient risk-taker...in your personal, professional and organizational lives.

Some have described risk-taking as deciding to embark on a REASONABLE adventure. I would like to emphasize the notion of reasonable. For Greg Louganis, the USA Olympic Star, to risk the high dive, even after injury may be reasonable - but for many of us **in** this room trying such a feat with or without injury would be foolish. No, I'm NOT talking about foolish risks - I'm talking about being courageous enough to engage in the reasonable and exciting adventure of living. To be bold enough to go on even if you can't see around the curves of life even if you can't see everything ahead.

### The Ironic Result of Risk Avoidance

It is ironic that sitting and watching eggs in one basket may be MORE risky than moving forward on the fully uncharted course. The history books are filled with lessons of what

happens when people, organizations and nations choose blinders to the forces of coming change. When people and groups...are afraid to take risks, are afraid to fail and afraid to lose their existing identity, money, power and possessions...they are usually more prone to failure.

Take the Dutch of the 17th Century. They were the vigorous economic and social innovators of the time. But within only a hundred years...they were overtaken by the English. Why? Because a risk avoidant, fearful attitude settled over Holland. Those who had accumulated fortunes in the years of prosperity attended exclusively to keeping them. Politics turned ugly. Public spirit

disintegrated. The Dutch became slow to adopt new advances in shipbuilding, weaving, fishing, mapmaking and navigation. They clung to the established order...threatened by new ways of doing things. They refused to risk rearranging the safety of the present...and thus missed the chance to have the talents, skills and organizational arrangements on line when these were needed;

Many skilled observers of the U.S. organizational and economic scene fear we may also be taking the risk avoidant path of the 17th Century Dutch. Bestselling author and organizational researcher, Tom Peters warns us that predictability is a thing of the past and all SAFE bets are off. In Thriving on Chaos he seems to have ended his earlier Search for Excellence by declaring there are no excellent companies. He proposes revising the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"...to "If it ain't broke, you just haven't looked hard enough. Fix it anyway."

Flexibility, action and fast-paced, risky innovation are among his prescriptions for coping in a world turned upside down. He says we must all learn to LOVE change as much as we've hated it in the past.

Let me quote his views from page 45 of Thriving on Chaos:

"Every variable is up for grabs and we are meeting the challenge with inflexible factories, inflexible systems, inflexible front-line people - and worst of all, inflexible managers who still yearn for a bygone era where presiding over the opening of a new plant was about the most strenuous chore to be performed. Today loving change, tumult, even chaos is a prerequisite for SURVIVAL, let alone SUCCESS."

He argues that we must stop organizing for stability...that only organizations structured for change will survive. That managers must take much greater risks...get better at seeing the whole picture...listen, listen, listen...trust people to innovate and insist on absolute integrity.

He says we must ALL get going and try something and it is the job of the team leader to create enthusiasm, join in the hands on work, break-down barriers to change, and help rid all minds of the fear of taking a risk.

In doing this he says leaders must create more open climates for innovation. Just because someone holds a job in a particular unit or division...this should not exclude him or her from producing ideas applicable to other units. Once the ideas are produced, the leader decides upon the "best" most workable, quality suggestion irrespective of where it came from.

### Overcoming Fear and Failure

Fear...we don't talk about it very often. For some reason we find it hard to admit that change makes us fearful...it brings up that old certainty - uncertainty tension. But to become better risk-takers we have to face these fears directly...our own and that within those we teach and lead.

Research had identified some of the most paralyzing barriers to change.

These include:

Fear of losing control. When we can recognize ourselves...and encourage others to see...that having control is a myth...maybe we can stop worrying about it.

Fear of conflict. As many of you know...if you want to make enemies just try to change something. Change nearly always requires the opening of communication channels to help unfreeze established patterns and ideas. This unfreezing is nearly always accompanied by a sudden increase in the communication of hostility. Rather than fearing it...we must come to accept this type of conflict as a normal part of the change process. If we don't learn ways to work through this productively we are almost certainly guaranteeing continuation of the status quo.

Fear of rejection. Will my job be abolished? Will my program become obsolete? Will I lose status and power - be rejected in the eyes of others? Dealing with this fear in ourselves and others requires competence and confidence building. It requires helping people to see themselves in much broader, more flexible terms - as multi-faceted contributors to teams not necessarily defined by program, discipline or profession.

Fear of failure. Some of us have to let go of the drive for perfection. We simply can't wait for the perfect plan, the perfect tool, the perfect organization. And because we can't wait...and because in most areas we lack the certain knowledge to blueprint the perfect solution...we must risk many experiments. Man; small risky experiments will fail and this failure will be compounded into more failure if we don't learn from these failures and immediately get up and try again.

As leaders and professionals we must rid ourselves of these fears and decide to be confident and build confidence in others. We must learn to shrug off quickly and even laugh about our personal and organizational disappointments and failures. Peters calls this creating and encouraging "small wins" and "fast failures."

## Meaning of This to Extension

So what does all this mean to the Extension professional and the Extension system? I think it means tremendous change in the business we do and the way we do business. We've now been through a period of self-examination, soul-searching and public and self-critique. We've decided to give up the old false security of simply "doing things right" and added "doing the right things." We must combine future thinking and innovation with quality delivery. We've agreed that as a system we must position ourselves right in the middle of all this uncertainty and take the risks required to demonstrate that we have tremendous untapped potential. Potential, not only to do the right things ourselves, but in keeping with our educational mission...potential to help others see and risk to do the right things as well.

We have established nine initiatives in some of the thorniest issue areas on the public agenda today.

1. Alternative Agricultural Opportunities
2. Building Human Capital
3. Competitiveness and Profitability of American Agriculture
4. Conservation and Management of Natural Resources
5. Family and Economic Well-Being
6. Improving Nutrition, Diet, and Health
7. Revitalizing Rural America
8. Water Quality, and
9. Youth at Risk

Embedded in these broad initiatives are high priority problems of urgency at the center of the national agenda. As Extension we must be at the heart and head of the struggle to assist people to: cope with the effects of agricultural chemicals on the environment, develop a safe food supply, search for means to add value to traditional agricultural and forestry products, find new ways to catalyze socio-economic development in rural communities, build and sustain a profitable and environmentally sound agricultural base for the future and provide child and youth development programs worthy of an organization with an unparalleled national network and 75 years of successes and failures. These are problems of urgency for which we have a research base with which to connect and from which to build. This is an agenda that can be addressed by a cadre of professionals that can reteam and when necessary retool. And these are the problems we are mandated by our institutions and our clients to address.

Yes, this 75th anniversary year is not the time for Extension to merely talk about creating change...how we will do something in the future. We must start now, with rather raging impatience, to tackle a more risky-action packed agenda. It will certainly result in some wins and some losses.

## We Will Act

And in acting...we plan to forget our losses...learn from them and build on our wins. We intend to face up to conflict and see it as a natural part of the creative process. We have already opened communication channels to new audiences and new organizations in the public and private sector and we don't intend to leave our traditional clientele behind. We want to work with our traditional clientele to shed the possibility of return to the certainty myth and join in the reasonable adventure.

We are encouraging what Peter's calls skunkWORKS...with innovative testing of model programs. We are restructuring for improved teamWORK - searching out and using talents regardless of disciplinary training or programmatic location. And we are committed to hard...INTELLIGENT work. Some of us may have gotten a little lazy in serving only the easy to reach and teach clientele...a little lazy in really listening to what our clients see as the priority issues today...a little lazy in considering changing our office hours when many of our clients can't be reached eight to five, Monday through Friday...a little lazy in neglecting to invest the energy required to become early users and understanders of the new technology that is rapidly changing the way Extension will do business in the future...and finally a little lazy in seeing the massive global and demographic changes already on the move.

This hard...intelligent work should be no stranger to most of us in Extension. It is the ethic cornerstone of what helped bring American agriculture...to its envied and imitated world position today. It is an American agriculture and rural way of life that spawned most of us in this room.

But TODAY isn't tomorrow, or next week or next year. And even if unpopular with some..we must move quickly to risk going beyond the tried and true...the better safe and it ain't broke view. The future IS uncertainty. We simply can't sit and guard a single basket of aging eggs, if we hope to enjoy any flirtation with success. Unless, we think we can market the eggs to those preferring the 30-year old variety.

As Extension professionals we must begin optimistically carving out a whole network of still uncharted roads. Roads that will lead to a more dynamic, risk-seeking, creative, flexible, action-oriented organization. And we expect in all that digging and earth moving and rearranging that we will probably also change ourselves as well. With a bit more risk-taking, I think many Extension professionals will learn to meet the challenge of change head-on. They will reap the exhilarating rewards of that success and eliminate the possibility of paralysis because of occasional failures.

I, for one, think there has never been a more exciting time to be an Extension professional...to be able to say on this our 75th anniversary...we are investing in America's future in ways never dreamed of before.

So in closing let me share the sage advice of an anonymous Spanish bullfighter:

"To fight a bull when you are NOT scared is NOTHING. And to NOT fight a bull when you ARE scared is NOTHING. But to fight a bull when you ARE scared...that is SOMETHING."

Remarks by Dr. Myron D. Johnsrud, Administrator, Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture , Ruby Award Winner, Epsilon Sigma Phi, Extension National Professional Society, at the NASULGC Annual Conference, Dallas, Texas, on November 14, 1988.

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