

This issue of the Dispatch tells the stories of two entrepreneurs, Brian Vulgamore and Justin Topp, who each decided to take advantage of professional development to enhance their skills and improve their business. They found, much to their delight, that the relationships gained through these connections were an added benefit. Davon tells the story of Vulgamore Farms and Lance of T-T Ranch. Dr. Bill Long takes a step back to ask, and try to answer, the question of what goes into the making of a good decision. As usual, we hope you enjoy our thoughts—let us know your own!

A Wise Choice

By [Davon Cook](#)

[Vulgamore Farms](#) in southwest Kansas has participated in a peer group since 2011. Brian Vulgamore admits he was initially skeptical of the value of joining such a group. A friend invited them repeatedly, so Brian sent a key employee to check it out, thinking it wasn't worth his time. That employee returned home fired up and convinced him and his brother, Myles, to participate. Since then, they've formed deep bonds within the group.

When asked what information he's found valuable to share among members, Brian has a list you'd expect: comparing employee compensation packages, grain facility layouts, H2A program implementation, input comparisons, landowner relations, etc. But the most impactful learning for Vulgamore Farms has been how to build a strong culture for their employee team and how to deploy the team effectively. With over 40 team members in their diversified farm operation, optimizing that performance is significant. For example, on one visit to a peer group member's farm, they saw the importance of consistent staff meetings and then decided to implement them. Brian says, "Now the idea of not having that weekly meeting and an informal daily meeting at breakfast to touch base seems ridiculous to us." They also modeled their new office on a group member's office to reinforce the culture of collaboration they want.

"During the interactions with other members' employees when we visited their farms, it became obvious the strength of each farm operation was in their people. We've become more intentional about creating a healthy culture in our operation because of it," Brian explained. And the knowledge and encouragement to keep improving people management skills came uniquely from the peer group. "I can get agronomy and financial advice from numerous outlets, but it's more difficult to find experts in how to manage a large farm. Being able to compare notes with peers going through the same challenges has proven invaluable."

How does one get the most out peer group participation? Brian stressed three things:

1. **Have open doors for peers to understand you better.** That provides context for them to give ongoing input in conversations for months and years to come. It's not always an 'aha' moment at the meeting itself.
2. **Invite your peers to call you on your bull.** Those you have relationships with are in the best position to hold you accountable to your goals – even when the message may be a tough one to hear.
3. And finally, **don't let your ego get in the way.** If you think you have it all figured out, a peer group probably isn't the right place for you.

Vulgamore Farms looks forward to continuing to learn from and with their trusted group of peers.



The Keys to Growth: Sharing, Support, and a First Next Step

By [Lance Woodbury](#)

Four years ago Ag Progress launched its educational arm, the [Progress Coach](#). Our major goals were to get farm and ranch owners/managers together who faced similar obstacles, challenge them with new concepts and build a sense of community and common interest. Justin Topp of [T-T Ranch](#) in Grace City, ND was in our original cohort in 2015 and remains actively involved in our thrice-annual meetings, each of which lasts 24 hours with educational content addressing one of the three circles of family business: ownership, management, and relationships.

When I asked Justin about the benefits he sees from the program, he mentioned the opportunity “to share frustrations, challenges, ideas and information about our family businesses...it acts as a support group of people in relatively the same place in business and in life, trying to manage around the great and not-so-great things of a family business.”

One of the key concepts in the program is the importance of taking “the first next step.” We have noticed that when working on business improvements, succession planning or any number of initiatives, the amount of change required can feel overwhelming. But by focusing on taking the next step – be it a conversation, a small commitment, an experiment, or a hiring – whatever it is, that step creates momentum that takes the business in a new direction. Justin says that “The first next step...is something that I don’t say all the time or isn’t daily running through my head, but I can assure you that I am using it a lot.”

Meeting with peers from across the country, to learn from and with them, has become increasingly important as farms and ranches look for creative ways to solve problems. Justin concluded his comments by noting that “having a group of people to continually get together with and share in the successes and defeats has been a great asset. It has challenged me to be a better leader with a vision for the future and not just tomorrow.”

Faith and Family Business The Anatomy of a Good Decision

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

Over the years I have had the privilege of teaching at a few colleges as well as pastoring both small and large congregations. Invariably people would come to me asking my opinion on what they should do in a confusing situation. Often they would frame it in terms of “God’s will”—i.e., what would God have them do?

While not trying to discourage their spiritual quest, I usually would gently shift the discussion away from their trying to “hear” God and focusing instead on the steps they could take right now to make good decisions. It is striking to me how the advice that I would usually give is neatly reflected in the ways that both Brian Vulgamore and Justin Topp made what they consider to be very good decisions. Three points should be noted:

First, before making an important decision, **take time to gather facts**. I chuckled as I read Brian’s account—he was not at first even *willing* to spend his personal time to attend. But he was still willing to gather facts. What *is* a peer group? How does it work? What will be asked of me? There is so much information out there today about just “going with your gut,” that I think a renewed emphasis on first gathering data is important.

Second, **be willing to take, as Justin said, “the first next step.”** One ought to look at a decision as the end product not just of gathering facts but also of mulling them, considering alternative courses of action, and then taking that “first next step.” Many decisions are made in haste because we feel we *ought* to decide. But in most instances if something is important to you, it can mature in your mind before that “first next step.”

Finally, once you have made a decision, **be clear on what you want out of a situation**. It is a virtue to develop an inquisitive attitude towards others’ needs, but you ought first to be clear on what your needs are. What can a peer group or an educational opportunity offer to you? Once you have a clear sense of where you are going, it is great to include others in your quest.

