

The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP) Report 2016

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I report as the fortunate recipient of the Lorna & Bert Kelly Memorial “The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers” (TEPAP) Scholarship for 2016, held at Barton Creek Resort, Austin, Texas, by Texas A&M. With the benefit of the contacts established during my 2008 Nuffield and subsequent return to present at a Rangelands Conference in 2011, I combined this opportunity with a couple of industry conferences, a 3,000 mile road trip across the South Western States and a visit to two Hawaii Island Ranches to create my own “mini Nuffield”.

TEPAP is best described as an intensive seven day exposure to agricultural business management best practice in the United States, in an International arena. Following previous experiences in the States of fantastically hospitable, but largely North America orientated producers, it was a delight to share the week with 93 agricultural peers who were well aware of the International scene of which they were a part, with thorough presentations on and robust discussions about the global drivers we share. The wealth of knowledge on offer was truly enhanced by the calibre of the fellow students and the networks created.

Among the fellow attendees were managers of very large multi-generational family operations, sponsored corporate representatives, through to more conservative self-funded “Mums & Dads” operators and even a rural bank manager. The group represented just over US\$1b in agricultural asset management and all brought a valued contribution and insight to my experience. Along with six Canadians, I was the only other International attendee, which led to plenty of interesting conversations and the odd “How does (x) effect Australia?” type question of presenters at the end of Q&A sessions. Without exception the presenters had the depth of knowledge to satisfy, though some were surprised to hear the accent in the room!

The opportunity to attend TEPAP arose at a time that has seen a succession process in our family company, leading to my evolving to a new level of corporate responsibility with the assuming of Managing Director in our business during 2015. With limited business management exposure prior to TEPAP, I am the first to admit I was diving in the deep end (and swimming with some big fish to stretch a metaphor!), however, in a similar nature to the Global Focus Program, I was saturated with invaluable information in a very short timeframe. Fortunately, very early in the week, we were encouraged to not just make notes but to make an action plan of “Management Behaviours I Will Implement or Change” as we went. Having scribed more notes than any time since school days by the end of the week, the action plan evolved into a type of executive summary of the key points to work through at home, with the challenge to those planning to do the second year to see how many actions were completed through the year. I am pleased to report I have made considerable progress to date on my 57 points, varying from recommended books to read, to developing job descriptions for roles that have been filled for years and to always dispose of public road carcasses (both literally and being aware of PR for business and industry).

The topics covered throughout the course were wide ranging, from personal development, staff management and financial drivers, through to international markets, free trade agreements and climate. (The full schedule can be viewed online at <http://tepap.tamu.edu/>) While it is beyond the scope of this brief report to give detailed accounts of all learnings, I will reflect on a few key points I came away with for my business that I feel may have the widest application to an Australian audience and that I haven't noticed in previous reports.

Process Management- Throughout the week and at the National Cattleman's Beef Association Conference in San Diego that followed, the vital importance of Process Management was time and again raised in the security of a business in insuring against staff absence (health/injury, termination) and duress (OH&S incident, public engagement, machinery etc.). This field covers many facets, however, the two most often raised and which struck a chord with me (following much of the last four years being spent contracting in the mining industry and experiencing them in action) were Job Descriptions and Standard Operating Procedures. Having sound Job Descriptions for all roles within your operation gives confidence that, when faced with the unexpected event (business) life will go on. Much as the length of a full Nuffield commitment has seen various

alternative management arrangements evolve (hands up those willing to admit their spouse did as good a job as they did during their time away on Nuffield, I know there's at least a couple of you!), a proper Job Description will ensure business security in the face of tragedy, succession or handling HR issues in larger operations. We should all be striving to insure our businesses against our own absence.

Standard Operating Procedures (also known variously as Standard Work Procedures, Standard Work Method Statements, the list goes on) spell out in detail the correct procedure for doing repetitious jobs and are the life blood of businesses that have high staffing numbers, especially those with shared roles such as the Fly In-Fly Out nature of the mining industry. In Agriculture, we all store an enormous amount of intellectual property in the one location that is pretty difficult to access for most others, our head. While for a small operation this may be fine and generational family farms will accommodate, those approaching succession/transition and larger operations risk massive cost due to this bottle-necking of knowledge, if not addressed appropriately. This may include how to safely and efficiently operate a given machine through to the correct application of the office filling system. Starting with the most crucial procedures to ensuring business continuity, I will be developing SOP's for our Agriculture business as I have previously for our Mine Contracting business, so that when growth happens, or if I'm flat on my back with an ailment, I will have the confidence that, as much as possible, things are in hand. Community organisations with regular intakes at Board and participant levels would also greatly benefit from this documentation of knowledge.

Peer Groups- During one of the evening sessions there was an extended discussion on the benefits of and experiences with peer groups. The examples discussed took various forms, however, with one small exception, all provided benefit to the participants. The ability to share issues among trusted members with a knowledge of the complexities of the participants own circumstance generated many good outcome examples. Peer group examples were both locally based and nationally scattered, the main key to success appearing to be a shared passion. As a Pastoral Industry, I am not aware of very many public examples of local Peer Groups, though they certainly do exist in Australian Agriculture. Those searching for a Nuffield research topic may consider "The Structure of Successful Peer Groups" as an option! Being, I believe, the eighth participant from Nuffield in TEPAP, it occurred to me that there may be a common interest amongst our own Alumni to work towards forming a Peer Group Network of some description. Much like Nuffield (albeit from a different shared experiential basis) TEPAP itself has its own strong Alumni Network, however, due to our remote location half a world away, opportunities to participate are limited.

Finally, here is a list by Presenter Dr David M. Kohl that may be enlightening.

Ten Best Management Practices of Young Producers-

- Modesty in family living
- Invest in productive assets (personal/business)
- Independent v interdependent
- Lifelong learners
- Strong group of peers
- Good set of mentors
- Profit plan 60-30-10
- Get better before getting bigger
- Balance between head v heart (numbers v passions)
- Strong relationship with lender

I would like to thank the Family of the Late Lorna and Bert Kelly for their ongoing commitment to the development of agricultural leaders. Likewise, a huge thank you to Chontell Giannini and her great team at itravel Griffith for supporting and organising the travel to Austin and accommodating the extra legs I requested. The organisers of TEPAP are excellent and I make particular mention of Program Assistant Connie Moore who does an amazing job of co-ordinating the 150 odd participants plus presenters. I commend and encourage Nuffield in continuing to provide Alumni professional development opportunities to build on the Scholar experience. Overall I have found this experience highly beneficial and would recommend to fellow Scholars to consider applying.