



Farming, baseball spring training, and logistics planning...

By John A. Gentle, DLP

IT DAWNED ON ME THE OTHER DAY that some of the practices we employ in the planning and management of our logistics operations are similar to how farmers plan and harvest crops and how baseball managers select their team and deal with the variety of performance issues and injuries throughout the long season.

As you go through this column pay careful attention to the concepts, note the advantages and risks associated with each, and see how your management approach compares to theirs.

In May I was visiting Tom and Michelle Bates, owners of Wellsmere Farm in Wells, Vt., and they encouraged me to try beet greens. They said that the cooked beet greens taste just like spinach and I should man up and try it. So, being a spinach lover, I crossed my fingers, said okay, and was pleasantly surprised at the flavor.

When I next spoke to them, I was informed that beets provided them with three different market offerings—greens early in the spring as well as greens and beets later in the summer—and that over-seeding the crop initially was key to their success.

The over-seeding process intentionally creates too much capacity. It allows them to harvest half of the greens in June by thinning the field and it provides the remaining plants ample space to develop and mature to their full potential for harvesting throughout the season.

Their approach has no prequalification process or safeguards. It's all about maximizing their return on investment as the selection is done in a random manner, simply eliminating "every other plant." Tom and Michelle have no way to determine what challenges are developing below the surface of the soil or what Mother Nature has in store for them.

To the contrary, major league baseball managers follow a structured, pre-qualification process designed to maximize the upside and minimize the downside. Spring training allows the staff to view all the pre-

assembled talent, evaluate them based on a number of different conditions, and then bring to market the best initial offering—farming out the rest for further development or merely trading them.

Management recognizes that some players will excel, others will not develop to their fullest skill potential, and some will lack the physical and mental stamina needed to find the way to win.

Most would probably say that the baseball manager has the better process—it allows for prequalification, testing, training, and opportunities for recovery through rehabilitation. Whereas the "beets and greens" approach, even though it affords a better and faster return on investment of seeds to dollars, has more to do with randomness and significant farming risks like drought and disease.

So why is it then that logistics managers tend to take the "greens and beets" approach over the less risk adverse

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baseball approach? The answer is simply impatience. Most logistics professionals feel the pressure to quickly bring capacity and savings to the bottom line without taking the time to develop the talent on their team or to conduct a low cost carrier development program.

Conversely, those shippers who have invested time and talent and nurtured their carrier base will continuously maintain a sustainable crop of top performing carriers.

If you are not pre-qualifying carriers today, consider doing so with a small, preselected group of smaller carriers or third party logistics providers that are willing to offer you a large number of trucks at a good rate and have a strong potential to be successful.

Let this group know in advance that you will be looking for and retaining only the best talent after a 90 day trial period, and charge your team with responsibility of creating the evaluation process.

And don't forget to eat your greens every day and develop carriers and team talent. It's critical to your success and will keep you out of the compost pile. □

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