

The value of knowledge diversity – What if I am wrong?

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Introduction

Pick a topic relating to the beef industry that you have an opinion on; think about how life experiences have shaped your knowledge about that topic to inform the opinion you have today. Is your knowledge diverse, or has your opinion been inadvertently skewed toward one perspective? I was often guilty of this and still am at times, it is part of being human and a result of how we live our lives.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of science is to test a hypothesis in order to inform and draw conclusions about the research question asked. Research has informed us that diversity of plants in a pasture is important for growing quality forage and maintaining soil health; diversity of investments is important for growing financial security; and diversity of cattle breeds is important to ensure stock are adapted to the various environments in which they graze. In the same vein, being open to and researching a diversity of perspectives is important for growing knowledge.

I first heard about the Black Swan metaphor on The Plant Free MD podcast. The metaphor is based on the presumption that all swans were white because, prior to 1697 when European explorers first saw black swans in Western Australia, the black swan didn't exist... or did they? This got me thinking about my opinions, my knowledge, what I believed to be true, and how I share those beliefs through my extension work. So, my New Year resolution for 2023 was to ask myself the simple question, "What if I am wrong?" at least once each day.

Questioning my own opinion and knowledge was initially daunting, fun and unsettling. It took effort and acknowledgment of my cognitive biases to actively listen to and consider opinions and learn about topics from people whose opinions and knowledge challenged mine. Apparently, there are many ways to plant and establish a pasture; nature can do it, humans can do it (with the help of nature) using drones, planters, spreaders. There are numerous grazing management practices used that result in profitable, productive, and sustainable beef businesses. I have recommended various methods to manage overland waterflow to prevent erosion, yet I am aware of many other effective interventions. Each time I engage with different perspectives, I gain appreciation for the diversity of approaches that can achieve the same goal.

Undertaking research and on-ground trials to ask, "is it true?", are critical to improve knowledge and understanding. I do not know what – or how much – I don't know, but my mind is more open than in the past, and actively diversifying my knowledge continues to add value to my work and life in general. Over time I have become comfortable with discomfort, and now approach questioning as a way to diversify my understanding of all manner of things.

Challenge yourself to step out of your comfort zone and ask, "What if I'm wrong?". To question your own knowledge and opinion is daunting and sometimes uncomfortable, but likely to deliver better outcomes and much more fun than the usual New Year resolutions!

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