

## Guiding Principles: Danny Klinefelter

By Tanner Ehmke

Since establishing The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP) at Texas A&M in 1991, Danny Klinefelter has made a life of building future farm leaders. Now after 25 years of teaching farmers of all ages how to improve their management skills, Danny looks back on what makes a successful education program.

**Teach a culture of learning:** “Organizational culture is way more important than I thought. I didn’t even know the term when I started. One of the best management practices is what I call autopsies. Everyone from the CEO to the successor to the management team periodically sits down and reviews their business plan with questions: Were there things we could or should have done differently even if it was successful? Were we lucky or do we have a process we can repeat? What additional information do we need? The whole idea is to get that information shared between people and get it implemented as quickly as possible. And you have to have buy-in from everyone instead of the top group just telling everyone down the line. The whole purpose is, ‘What did we learn?’”

**Keep it safe and confidential:** “Half of the program benefit really comes getting to know and discuss with other participants – not just faculty. But some people are really guarded, especially if they’re from big companies. As soon as they’ve been there for a couple of days, though, they open up about things they’d never talk about otherwise.”

**Ask for feedback and adapt:** “I’ve been willing to change every year. I listen to the audience and follow through on their recommended changes, and I think they’ve made it a different program than it originally was. It’s a program that reflects what they told me. They’re not naïve students. It’s not like they’re a bunch of college students with unrealistic dreams. They don’t come into it with unrealistic expectations.”

**Find quality presenters:** “One of the problems in academia is finding academics who are considered the top in their field. The rewards system is based so much on getting grants and publishing journal articles, and a lot of the stuff they put out isn’t in a form that a business person can use. Or, they may be really good thinkers but they’re not really good communicators. That’s one of the reasons that half of the faculty is from the private sector.”

**Plan the transition:** “I really ought to practice what I preach, so I have a successor that’s taken over. In a year-and-a-half I’ll retire. I wanted to be around a couple years to be a resource.”

**Have a purpose:** “There’s one saying that I’ve carried around in my wallet for nearly 40 years now: ‘The purpose of life is to count, to matter, to have it make some difference that you lived at all.’ We’ve done some surveys of people who have gone through here, and it’s been amazing to me how many of their practices have changed as a result of the program. It made me feel good knowing that it had an effect on behavior. The learning didn’t end when they walked out the door.”