

# Go for the Good of the Whole

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The first rule of Holistic Management is to “go for the good of the whole” in every decision. Ranching isn’t a job, it’s a lifestyle. You hear it all the time, so why is it that so many Montana ranchers leave the quality of life portion of the “whole” out of the equation? Holistic Management principles are guided very heavily by personal values. For the Meyer Ranch those personal values are family, quality of life, stewardship and community; though the business hasn’t always allowed for balance in all of those areas. Over Christmas this year, sitting with the family talking about the way things used to be, it was very obvious that my older brother and sister grew up on a very different ranch than my two younger brothers did. Being the middle child, I feel like I had a unique experience, being old enough to remember how hard things were early on, but young enough to witness how the ranch has changed over the years.

You see, my dad (Chester Meyer) inherited the ranch, which is near Ekalaka, MT from my grandpa. My dad got his start in the middle of a recession, with an overgrazed ranch, falling down fences, rusty machinery and 3 kids (plus 2 more he hadn’t met yet). We had to work really hard growing up, especially my older brother who (big surprise) decided to join the military and pursue engineering instead of come home to the ranch. There was a quality of life aspect missing back then and, quite frankly, ranching wasn’t appealing to him, at least the way he’d experienced it growing up.

I remember getting up at 2 a.m. and waddling out to the barn through snowdrifts because we were calving in the middle of winter. There were nights I was in a tractor raking hay at 2a.m. to beat the summer heat. I left for college in 2006 with no plans to get into agriculture myself. Today, all 5 of us Meyer “kids” want to get into ranching in some capacity and *now* the ranch both provides a good management blueprint, and is in a good position to help us all achieve our goals thanks to greater profitability. This, to me, says that holistic management has been GOOD for my family.

My dad first started making some changes in management in 2006. He was just hoping to lower inputs and develop a “thrifter” type of cow. It wasn’t until after a Holistic Management seminar in 2010, where he got in touch with people who could mentor him, that he really started to implement intensive grazing practices and make big changes on the ranch. The big shift in his philosophy was from a prior focus on profits/head to a profit/acre focus. That means that we now raise smaller calves, but more of them. I say “we” because this truly was a family effort. We all have a sense of ownership and that has made all the difference.

To get the kind of low-input cattle we wanted and improve the ecological function of the ranch, we fed less hay in the winter, forcing the cattle to forage for at least half of their diet and stopped supplementing with anything besides salt and mineral. We put in more cross-fencing and water tanks on what were once hay fields to be able to implement intensive (high density/ short duration) grazing practices. Doing so decreased the ability of our livestock to be selective in their grazing, therefore increasing the utilization of our forages. Rather than store that forage as hay, we let the cows harvest it for us all summer long, thereby differing the native range for winter grazing and cutting costs to winter cattle on the ranch.

We've stopped using ivermectin for parasite control because we want to select for natural parasite resistance in our cattle and we know that it is harmful to dung beetle populations which serve important ecological functions (Verdu, 2015). Any cows that couldn't breed up under that kind of selection pressure were culled. Some years, the cull pen was too full for anyone's comfort level! It was through that process that the animals on the ranch today are so hardy and efficient.

By forcing our cattle to be more non-selective in their grazing, we put greater nutritional stress on them as this can cause a dip in the quality of their diet, especially in the short term, before pasture quality can improve in response to the change in management. As a result, we found that many cattle fell out of our program. Their input requirements were just too high to be suited to our environment. This shift in our herd composition brought about an unexpected enterprise; Meyer Ranch Grassfed Genetics! We have found that there is a tremendous need for low-input, grass-fed genetics with producers looking to utilize resources more efficiently and increase profits.

Below, I will compare the various ways the operation has changed in the past 20 years. These are changes that have worked for us, but holistic management is not about applying a cookie cutter management plan made up by someone else. Part of the values held by everyone involved with the ranch is that we leave the land better than we found it. You can't manage what you don't measure; so through monitoring and soil testing we can show, both quantitatively and visually, that we have done that. The things that work on the Meyer Ranch may not work for every operation. I guarantee you that in 5 years, the management of the ranch will look different than it does today. It's important to be adaptable, constantly evolving and always pursuing more information.

15 Years ago

Today

5,000-acres owned	9,500 acres owned
1250 lb cows	1150 lb cows
200 cows – calves sold in the fall	500 cows + 500 yearlings - sold in late summer(@ 700lbs)
.05 AU's/acre ranch stocking rate	.1 AU's/acre ranch stocking rate
Late Feb/early March calving	Late April/ early May calving
500 lb. calves at 7 months	450 lb. calves at 7 months
October weaning	February weaning
2 tons of hay/cow for 6 months of the year + cake supplementation	500-1000 lbs. hay/cow for 4 months of the year or less - no other supplementation

(Occasionally the stocking rate is higher- during high moisture years, additional cattle are brought in and grazed on contract)

The profitability of any business is determined by how efficiently available resources can be utilized and converted into a marketable product. It doesn't matter what industry you're in, the goal is the same; **efficiency**. How to appropriately measure efficiency is where a paradigm shift is needed. Some people measure success by their weaning weights and they measure a good cow herd by their breed-up percentage. To me, that's like deciding to invest in a company that makes the coolest looking stuff without any research whatsoever into the business model! A holistic approach to management will help you dissect your business structure and maximize efficiency.

In any area of life, you have to do something no one else does to get something no one else has. This holds true in ranching as well. After evaluating our cattle, Gearld Frye with Bovine Engineering and Consulting began spreading the word: "The Meyer Ranch has the best commercial cowherd I've ever seen! And I evaluate cattle all over the country!" But we wouldn't be where we are now if when that cull pen started filling up, we had altered the course. That didn't align with my parents' holistic goal. The Meyer Ranch is a true testament to the blessings that can come from first defining, then holding true to your values.

My dad says all the time "if only I'd known then what I know now... If only I'd had someone to show me what to do". But there are people out there who are implementing Holistic Management practices and improving their business and their lives. They've made the mistakes you don't have to make and, most likely, they will be more than happy to mentor you. Find those people, talk to them, ask questions, attend seminars and invest in your education! It will pay you back in dividends.



View from the sky – 500 cow/calf pairs intensive grazing. These cows get moved every morning and night and paddock size is adjusted for forage quality. This land won't be grazed again for at least 12 months. (Photo Credit- Shaelyn Meyer)



Native Range - The property fence line going into the winter grazing season. The neighbors land is on the right. Photo Credit: Chester Meyer



High production year! Cattle brought in for contract grazing. Photo Credit- Alyson Hycks-Lynch



After the Mob has moved on. A very nice layer of biomass covers the soil. This will help keep it cool and hold moisture. Photo Credit- Alyson Hicks-Lynch

## References

Verdu, Jose R., and Vieyle Cortez. *Nature.com*. Macmillan Publishers, Aug. 2015. Web. 29 Dec. 2016.