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Dairy Business Association: Dairy Strong speaker: Disrupt your business before market does

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MADISON, Wis. — Ryan Estis, a business performance expert and entrepreneur, challenged farmers and other business owners today at the Dairy Strong conference to embrace disruption on their own terms, look for opportunities and be strong leaders.

Adapting to change and thriving in a volatile environment like that of the past two years is crucial, Estis said, and farmers must be catalysts for change as markets and day-to-day operations shift frequently.

Estis, a keynote speaker at the Dairy Business Association event, was an ad agency executive before launching a research and learning organization that works with leading companies around the world. “In business, we all must disrupt ourselves before others have a chance to do it to us,” Estis said.

He challenged audience members to consider how they respond to losses in business. He pointed to the experiences of some of the most successful companies, whose leaders found opportunities to adapt and invest during tough times.

“From crisis emerges opportunity,” he said.

As entrepreneurs, farmers should consider new ideas and then immediately turn those ideas into actionable items, Estis said. Conducting small experiments and learning what works and doesn’t can help. Make it a continuous process, he recommended, because success today can breed complacency that brings failure tomorrow. “Entrepreneurs have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

Estis also focused on the importance of leadership in keeping employees committed and effective. Success comes, he said, to owners who create a company culture that keeps employees at the center. Something as simple as establishing core values on a farm can help employees become far more engaged.

Today, employees typically want to be aligned with their company and understand expectations, they appreciate educational opportunities and hope to achieve rewarding, rich work experiences, Estis said. Getting the whole package and tailoring it to their specific needs is what will make the partnership between employer and employee successful.

“A work-life balance with benefits all around, advancement opportunities and employers with ethics are just some of the characteristics workers are looking for in their employers these days,” he said.

Farmers can also benefit from understanding performance management, Estis said. Aligning expectations, providing consistent feedback and holding themselves as owners accountable make a difference.

“Work should change your life in a positive way,” he said. “Good leadership helps create symbiotic relationships between customers, workers and employers, and it can change lives.”