

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Finding Virtue in the Work Place

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How can we teach better work ethics? This question should resonate with many greenhouse operators, but before we can attempt an answer, we ought to consider what we're looking for.

Work ethics are defined as: "The principle that hard work is intrinsically virtuous or worthy of reward." So if we're simply looking for people who work hard for long hours and minimal pay, then we omit any notions of virtuosity or reward. We won't find future leaders among that crowd. Neither can we expect them among the graduates of any college leadership course; it takes a lot more than academic excellence to build companies, lead people and drive innovation. No classroom and no textbook can teach this particular sense of responsibility and commitment to self-direction. What we're looking for is dedication to life-long learning in order to achieve unpretentious success.

As longtime growers, we likely possess adequate work ethics, otherwise we would no longer be in business. But where did it come from? Evidence suggests that genetics isn't a factor. We didn't wake up one morning, rub our hands and turn into instant workaholics. Somewhere along our career path we must have met teachers and mentors who instilled the necessary mindset, and chances are that we didn't even notice when it happened.

I'm convinced that it's utterly futile to try to mandate ambition in the same manner that we give instructions on how to mix fertilizer. The driving force for work ethics is passion and the fuel for excellence is resilience. We cannot simply command anyone to develop passion or resilience no matter the authority and/or the title that we may carry.

Think about it: Why is it that we consider it work when we're asked to sweep a floor, but we consider it a sport when we challenge ourselves to climb the highest mountain we can find? Both activities take effort. Sweeping, however, is forced onto us by necessity or by circumstance, whereas the mountain is conquered by our own decision and out of our own free will.

We cannot mandate our apprentices to develop stamina, resilience or talents. We can only encourage them to keep pushing themselves, so that they learn how to exceed their limits. Once they experience the tremendous gratification that comes from success if accomplished by one's own power, they'll demand to be challenged because they want to repeat the journey. Work will take the place of a hobby, a sport, a lifestyle.

For young people in our modern world, it's become very difficult to discover the thrill inherent in pushing boundaries. We allow precious few opportunities to do so in a meaningful way. Learning to overcome challenges means learning how to fail without becoming a failure. For previous generations, failure was a fact of life in challenging times; not succeeding simply meant that next time you had to try harder.

This wisdom has disappeared in recent decades. Failure is mostly seen as a detriment to the development of self-esteem, rather than a benefit to character. The majority of parents work excessively hard to prevent their children from getting exposed to the pain brought on by lack of success. The result is a constant haze of indifference and boredom, which permeates these sheltered lives. Those affected by such mental smog might seek to escape into adventure vacations, thrill rides, drugs and alcohol, but natural inborn ambition suffocates in the tedium and self-esteem withers as a result.

Greenhouse work could offer ample opportunity to break from this boredom. Horticulture is such a broad subject that growers will never reach a point where there's no reason to keep learning and to keep challenging themselves. Boredom isn't usually in the vocabulary that we use to complain about our work. It's our challenge to help junior horticulturists to identify with these opportunities, so that they can experience the gratification that comes from achievements, especially if they were accomplished against the odds.

Coaching young people into meaningful work ethics means we have to challenge them, give them room to fail, encourage them to try harder and catch them before they think of themselves as failures. If we can help them discover the value of mastering a challenge, then we've done more for their education than any school or college will ever be able to offer. Our industry will have gained young professionals who will proudly introduce themselves as horticulturists and carry our legacy into the future. **GT**

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