GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Stubborn Competence

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Many years ago, we had a sign in our greenhouse lunchroom that read:

Company Rules:
Rule #1: The Boss Is Always Right.
Rule #2: In the unlikely case that the boss is not right, Rule #1 shall immediately take effect.

This seems to me a perfect description for the mindset of the common greenhouse grower. We're an opinionated and individualistic breed. We need to be or else we would not survive in this line of work. It's the easiest thing for anyone to walk through our greenhouse and find flaws in our crops and faults in our methods. It's exponentially more difficult for anyone to do a better job. For this reason, we need a healthy measure of bloody-minded stubbornness, so that we can defend what we're doing and stay on course whenever someone thinks that they know better.

Just look at any of the online greenhouse discussion forums. The variety of available opinions is as broad as the variety of problems offered for discussion. Clinging to our own idiosyncrasies helps us deal more efficiently with the sheer number of ways in which stuff can go wrong once we place a crop into a greenhouse.

There is, however, a difference between healthy stubbornness and unrestrained ego. Yes, we do need hard-headed resilience to give us backbone in the face of adversity. In our business, we learn primarily by making mistakes. When something goes wrong, we must first acknowledge that we blundered, then we need the tenacity to keep trying different methods until something works better. This is how we learn and become better growers. Repeated failure before experiencing success may wound our pride, but it teaches us the humility to accept that we don't know everything.

It's a different matter when we allow our ego to convince us that we're in control of absolute knowledge. Infallibility is always an illusion. People are in trouble when they no longer recognize how much they don't know. They act incompetent because they greatly overestimate their own competence.
Author Steve Dennis calls this phenomenon "executive ego dysfunction." It's not a form of strength to believe in one's own greatness. It's a damaging cognitive bias and a symptom of weakness because it deflects any doubt or justified criticism by laying blame on collaborators or circumstances.

Without recognizing mistakes for what they are, learning from them is an unlikely outcome. Successful collaboration is improbable if there's no mutual willingness to accept critique. A vainly distorted caricature of true competence replaces the backbone of resilience. Instead of honing genuine talents on the grindstone of adversity, the ego demands that all energy be invested into maintaining a mirage of greatness.

One of my mentors once asked me these questions: Who is more damaging to the success of a company? Someone who makes an honest, costly mistake, admits it and learns from it? Or someone who watches quietly while others make mistakes and then uses this misfortune to advance their own career?

Anybody working in a leadership role ought to be aware of this trap: Our ego has the tendency to gloat when we see rivals to our competence struggle and nosedive into failure. In my native German we even have a word for such reveling in the misery of others. We call it "Schadenfreude." Usually, such triumphant opportunism ends badly because it smothers the capacity for humility. We need humility to keep our minds open. Humility is the true basis of success because it enables lasting, effective collaboration with our staff, our coworkers and our industry.

How do we manage our ego? I would encourage every grower to use every opportunity to invite critique from other specialists. The more qualified the critic, and the more honest the criticism, the more beneficial it is for us. I know from raw experience how painful it can be when another expert points out all the flaws in our work and all the mistakes that are plainly visible in our crops. I also know that these ego-shattering experiences were the most effective education that I've ever received. **GT**

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