GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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When Passion Gets Mistaken for Leadership

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In most green industry businesses, the most passionate person is easy to spot. They're in early every morning, they stay late and they care deeply about the work. When something goes wrong, they take it personally. When something goes right, they feel responsible. So when it's time to promote someone, that person often feels like the obvious choice.

It makes sense. Passion is visible. It's measurable in hours, effort and intensity. And in an industry built on long days and hard work, passion feels like proof that someone is ready for more responsibility.

But, over time, many of us discover something uncomfortable. Passion doesn't always translate into leadership. In fact, sometimes it gets in the way.
Across the industry, the pattern looks familiar. A family member who has (or hasn't) always been involved steps into a leadership role. A top grower becomes a manager. A longtime employee is promoted because they "know the ins-and-outs." None of these decisions are careless. They're made with good intentions, under pressure, and often out of loyalty.

We tell ourselves, we expect and we hope that leadership will come with time. That caring more will make things work. That the passion that person has will spread to the rest of the team.

Sometimes it does. Often, it doesn't.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Early in my career, I found myself in a leadership position largely because of who I was, how much I cared and the weight of responsibility. I worked relentlessly. I wanted the business to succeed and I believed that intensity would pull everyone in the same direction.
Instead, it created friction. I talked more than I listened. I pushed harder when people hesitated. That's the natural order of things, right? You're put in charge to make decisions and they're suppose to follow. I assumed that because I cared deeply, if I showed them how much I cared, trust would naturally follow.

It didn't.

What I didn't understand at the time was that leadership isn't about how strongly you feel—it's about how well you

connect. Passion can drive action, but leadership requires alignment. And alignment doesn't come from urgency. It comes from communication, empathy and humility, all together building trust.

Looking back, the problem wasn't my passion; the problem was that I relied on it alone. I treated leadership like an extension of effort—that it was the position I held, the responsibilities I managed, the victories I won—when, in reality, it's a different skill entirely.

Leadership shows up in the quiet moments. In how clearly expectations are communicated. In whether people feel heard before decisions are made. In how mistakes are handled. In whether accountability feels fair or personal.

Passion pushes. Leadership steadies.

Passion assumes trust. Leadership earns it.

Passion is felt. Leadership is experienced.

This confusion isn't unique and it isn't a failure of character. It's a common blind spot in businesses built by hardworking people who care deeply about what they've created. When growth accelerates, leadership demands change faster than most of us expect.

The good news is that this realization doesn't mean something is broken—it means something is becoming clear.

When leaders slow down enough to listen, when they replace intensity with intention and when they approach conversations with curiosity instead of urgency, teams respond. Not because passion disappears, but because it's finally supported by something stronger.

If any of this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Many of us have confused passion for leadership at some point. The difference isn't learned in classrooms or textbooks; it's learned through experience, reflection and sometimes discomfort.

And recognizing the pattern is often the first step toward leading better and using passion as a driving force rather than a sword and shield. **GT**

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