

Herding (Plant Pathology) Cats

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In our opinion, “Cat Herders” has to be one of the greatest commercials of all time (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTwJzTsb2QQ).

There are tremendous parallels between herding cats and working with plant pathologists, since neither group is inclined to follow other people.

All of us, at different times, are put in charge of groups of people with differing opinions as to how to proceed to a consensus, let alone a solution. During this time, conflict arises, and when it does, it is often difficult to separate the person and the issue. Separating the two is usually the first step in resolving disagreement and keeping the herd together.

Too often, many of these disagreements begin with misunderstandings, social miscues, or unintended slights. In this way, people, including plant pathologists, are often like cats, in that they respond in one of three ways:

- 1) Hide: Avoidance prevents direct conflict.
- 2) Hinder: This could be simple lack of cooperation to full-blown passive-aggressiveness.

- 3) Harm: Belittling, yelling, or punishing behaviors that seek to damage.

As the leader, you need to understand where the individual is coming from—what history may be involved; what key pieces of information might have been overlooked, misrepresented, or misunderstood; or even what simple miscommunication may have transpired to get to the conflict.

Knowing where people are coming from is the first step. After separating the person from the issue, it's time to confront the issue. Timing and preparation are important. The best way to prepare is to understand everyone's motivations—including your own. What are you trying to accomplish? What will you settle for? Understand what your wants and needs are before having to determine what others' needs and wants are. Having a clear picture of what you want directs the process. Approaching the situation as an opportunity to help others achieve their goals often defuses many conflicts before they develop. Ultimately, as a team, you all need to seek solutions together.

On the path to seeking solutions, recognize that there will be disagreement. Disagreement (issue) and disrespect (person) are two different things. Be sure to separate the person from the issue. Clarifying these two things improves communication. So does listening. Sometimes, the simple act of feeling heard is more important than solving the problem, and can allow compromise without the feeling of capitulation from either side. Whenever and wherever possible, look for points of consensus, no matter how small, and build from there.

At the same time, this is a conversation. Team members need to understand that you are responsible for building, developing, and maintaining the team. There needs to be understanding and respect, there doesn't necessarily have to be agreement. Although not ideal, sometimes, unpopular decisions need to be made. Reasonable people with the best intentions can disagree. Recognize that not every difference needs to be resolved. The goal should always be getting the right things accomplished, not necessarily being right. ■