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Everyone Hates a Winner: The Cost of Success and Toxicity in Ag Education

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We've all been there: the results of an event our students worked hard for. When a winner is announced and the realization hits that they fell short, our first reaction is natural – "Go congratulate them."

If asked, I bet we would all agree: we expect students to clap for the success of others, help those alongside them and reason that someone else's success doesn't diminish their own work or value. However, in rooms full of ag teachers, I wonder if we uphold the same standard. When pride, program growth and professional recognition become elevated, I think we need a thorough evaluation of whether we are practicing what we preach.

I am fortunate to teach in what many may deem a "successful agricultural education program." That success did not happen overnight, nor without serious intentionality, hard work, and sacrifice. What I have found difficult is reconciling the resentment that can accompany success within our profession, especially when that resentment affects innocent students.

I've had teachers finish conversations with the sentiment, "Wow, you are really cool, thanks for the help! All my teaching partners talk MAD TRASH about you. If only they would take a second to learn from you!" In this instance, I wasn't really struck by the negativity – my natural response was to ask, "Who do you teach with?" What struck me as this person listed their names: I've never met any of them. We've never had a single conversation. Yet, they still formed a pretty strong opinion of a person and program they never took the time to learn about. I wish I could say this was a one-off, isolated incident, but I've heard similar stories from numerous peers that create the same feeling of unease.

How would we respond if our students judged someone they never made an effort to know? What could we possibly gain from tearing down a colleague instead of learning from or building a relationship with them?

I've sat with suggestions from peers that our students are successful only because of the chapter name on the back of the jacket, the relationships built within the agricultural education community, or, even worse, assumptions about their background or their access to resources. I recognize barriers to resources exist, and those disparities deserve attention. But acknowledging inequities is different from deciding that an individual student hasn't earned their accomplishments through their own preparation, commitment to high standards, servant leadership, and merit. It's disheartening that something so out of their control not only affects them negatively but discredits their effort and right to a fair shot. Beyond that, it makes me feel guilty that they may carry that burden because of me.

A similar toxic mentality exists at livestock shows, so I'll make a correlation we can all recognize with our local county fair. We've all heard someone flippantly claim that the same exhibitors always win because they must know the judge, definitely cheat, or surely have an unfair advantage. I'm sure there's a small percentage of times this may be true, but we've all seen these as convenient explanations that are often unfounded in truth – a culture of comparative resentment. Those familiar with the livestock industry can often recognize that consistent success may be the product of years of deliberate preparation, financial investment, weekends sacrificed at jackpots, relationships built with quality breeders, and honestly a little luck for the right look in the right moment.

Of course, competition should be fair, transparent, and open to scrutiny. No program, exhibitor/teacher, or judge should be above legitimate questions. But questioning a process is not the same as assuming that success must be the product of favoritism. The whispering toxicity that fills some ag education rooms is no different than the county fair rumor mill. We need to be careful about the stories we tell ourselves when someone else succeeds. We can work our tails off and it still may not be our moment for a golden handshake. In these moments, we need to respond the same way we would ask our students to.

I don't need to deliver a diatribe on how challenging the work of an ag teacher is, but know it's significantly more defeating, and burnout is higher, when it feels lonely. We already face criticism from parents, community members, administrators, and others who may never fully understand what our job requires. The last place an agricultural educator should have to defend their worth, question whether they belong, or feel isolated because of success is among the very colleagues who should understand that level of sacrifice better than anyone. With many reasons leading to teacher attrition, this cannot be one we accept.

A redefining of what "success" is in a program may also be a factor in addressing competitive resentment within agriculture education. Different programs have different needs, communities, resources, and approaches; success looks uniquely different everywhere, and the

results that are successful may not be the traditional statistics that end up on an award show slide deck. In the endless opportunities ag education offers students, success isn't a limited resource. For one program, it may be a silver bowl or a plaque. For another, it's a student becoming the first in their family to attend college, creating a community of belonging, or a chapter creating opportunities that didn't exist for its students a year earlier.

I'm not pretending to be immune to the comparison game or the imperfect human feelings I need grace to abound in. But I bring this forward caring for the community that built me and one I desire to be better for as well. In this profession, I've had to make peace with the idea that I cannot control every outcome or every opinion someone forms, and to lovingly coach my students to rise to the same mindset. We aim to focus on what is in our control: the way we lead, treat others, and the culture we create for those entrusted to us. I believe we need to be continually reflective and honest about checking a competitive toxic mindset.

Replace resentment with curiosity about how to learn from the success of others. Replace whispers with constructive conversations that build relationships you're jealous of. Replace assumptions with questions of what practices we could adopt to benefit our own students. And if we have an ethical concern or disagreement, have the courage to address it directly and professionally rather than letting rumors and assumptions shape a narrative. I hope moving forward to hear more stories of success that inspire rather than threaten, and competition that brings out our best rather than our worst. And when those imperfect, competitive, human tendencies inevitably surface? Go congratulate them anyway.