



WORKING TOGETHER

Getting More Accomplished Choosing Good Leaders

by Susan Buser

Despite all the very good things going on in the alpaca industry, we all have our frustrations with various aspects of the industry. We all want to see more accomplished. We all would like to see less politics and more constructive action. We all want to see the alpaca industry prosper and grow in a way that benefits all farmers. So... what can we do? How can we as individuals make a difference?

For a start: we have to learn how to participate individually in the industry, we have to learn to work together with other farmers, and we have to support our leadership.

Does this mean we blindly follow anyone in leadership, we avoid all controversy all the time, that we never disagree with anyone else? No, but it does mean we examine ourselves and how we work with others, we learn to be discriminating in who we support for leadership positions, and we learn to address controversial issues in a constructive way.

We can start with ourselves. Think about how you respond when you hear negative information about someone in the industry. Do you believe it just because someone said it? Do you greatly enjoy hearing it and pass it on at the first opportunity? Do you contribute to the damaging of that person's reputation without any serious attempt to verify the information?

We all need to learn to be very careful about how we respond to rumors that float around. Most of the time they are being circulated by petty people who are really not contributing to the industry, but somehow find a lot of time to spend tearing down individuals who are contributing. Always seriously consider the source of the information as well as the fact that you may be the next target of this person if you encourage their ongoing destructive activity.

Many, many good leaders have been discouraged from ever running for office again because despite their endless hours of donated time on behalf of their fellow farmers, their reputations and businesses have been damaged while they were in office by petty, vindictive people and they do not want to open themselves up to that ever again. We can't keep losing good leaders to the destructive behavior of a few petty people, but how do we prevent that?

First we need to make sure we are not a part of this destructive behavior, then we need to learn to have the backbone to stand up for good people when they are unfairly attacked. We need to stand beside them and let them know that we appreciate their hard work and then publicly state that we know their character and their work and that they are being unfairly attacked. Only by standing up for people of integrity are we going to *have* any people of integrity that are willing to run for office. We can't elect good leaders, ask them to take on huge tasks for us, desert them when they have to deal with difficult issues and people, and then expect them to keep on working for us. We have to stand with them. We need to encourage our best people to continue to take positions of leadership by giving them rock-solid support when they have to deal with difficult circumstances on our behalf.

Does this mean we attack the other side? No. We can calmly state our support of the person we are defending and their character without attacking the other side. If we are calm in our response, usually the attacker will end up looking foolish because their attacks are so obviously personal and emotional, while the other person's position is factual. Of course this requires all of us to *think* when we hear some-

thing, and not let an emotional appeal get the best of us. We have to be logical and sensible.

Does this mean that we do not address real issues of misuse of office? Of course not. Once again, we have to have the backbone to face facts and to deal with people in office who are clearly not doing what they were elected to do, are in violation of the bylaws, are using the office for personal gain, etc. Many times good leaders are faced with having to deal with very difficult issues along these lines and need our support as they try to quietly and diplomatically do what is necessary to protect the integrity of the organization, its finances and bylaws.

When there is a problem, most organizations' bylaws or policy and procedures handbooks offer appropriate means for addressing these problems. (If they do not, they need to be revised to provide proper procedures for handling problems and means of protecting the organization.) Most issues can be dealt with quietly through the proper channels, by dealing with the facts of the situation (not making it a personal attack), providing proper documentation, and appealing to the rules of the organization. If the offender becomes belligerent and takes the matter public, then the issue should still be dealt with in as restrained a manner as possible, dealing only with the facts of the issue and avoiding the temptation to let the issue become a public emotional war of words. Always try to use good judgment, to focus on the facts, and to take care of the specific problem at hand.

Now what about those who hate controversy so much that they duck at any difference of opinion and refuse to become involved? Well, we all need to develop the courage to seek out the facts of any situation and make a reasoned judgment. We are not being "nice" (as we might think we are) by avoiding any controversy and labeling both sides in any disagreement as "contentious" and "trouble makers". We are actually harming the innocent party. We have to be smart enough to see who started the fight and who has been put on the defensive; who has the facts on their side and who is just blowing emotional smoke. We need to *think*, clearly and logically, and we need to stand up for good people. We can't expect change in our industry if we do not make it viable for good people to run for office by supporting them in a reasoned manner.

How do we know who to select for any office, in our affiliate or at the AOBA board level? First of all, we must select someone who is capable of doing the job. That may seem painfully obvious, but I am afraid that people are more often chosen for office based on personality, prominence, and "lik-

ableness" than on their actual qualifications for the position.

Read the bylaws of your organization. What is required of the person who fills that particular office? Most positions require a fair degree of organizational skills; some require additional specific skills. Does this person have any organizational skills? If so, are they capable of meeting the other requirements of the office? A candidate can be the nicest person in the world, but if they do not have the skills for a particular office, they should not run for it and you should not nominate or elect them. Especially presidents of organizations and national leaders must have be able to handle the multitude of tasks they will be dealing with. If you don't know them, talk to people who do and find out what their abilities are, what their work record is like in other volunteer jobs, and what their commitment level has been to other positions they have taken.

Next: Does the potential leader have passion? Do they have a vision for the organization? Let's be frank... some people take offices for reasons of personal promotion and then just loaf and let the other officers carry the load. (Anyone who has been in a serious position of leadership has worked with some of these people.) They have no passion at all.

A good officer will throw themselves into the job and will often end up spending many more hours than they ever imagined. Why? Because they have a strong passion for helping other people and have a vision for the possibilities of what the organization can accomplish. Once they get in office, they catch the "fever" and see all the things that can be improved upon, all the new educational programs that would help their members, and all the other great things that can be done. They often neglect their own businesses and opportunities for income in order to improve things for you and me. They are truly committed to something larger than themselves.

Does the potential leader have a reputation for being a hard worker? Some people *speak* passionately about things, but won't lift a finger to help get things done. They like the limelight, but they hate actual work! Make sure the person you are recommending for office is already a hard-working volunteer within the organization. Talk to people who have worked with them at events and on other boards and find out if they follow through on what they talk about.

Find out if the person is a person of integrity. Some of this you may be able to find out from talking to them at length. Take the time to do this before you vote for someone if you don't know them. Also, talk to trustworthy people that you

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know who have worked with them and get their “feel” for the person. Remember not to take the word of just anyone, since every good leader has several people who for whatever reason are out to get him. Choose other people of integrity, talk to them, and see what they can tell you.

I have found that non-profit work such as we do in this industry is the biggest revealer of character there is. Without the fear of getting fired and the reward of getting paid (like in a regular job), amazingly, some people who hold down very responsible positions in the “real world” will do absolutely nothing but complain and tear down the work of others when in a non-profit position. They will absolutely not do any of the work incumbent upon their position; they will put it all off on others and then use their now abundant free time to attack those doing the work. These are the people we need to avoid putting into positions of leadership.

It takes a person of character to do endless hours of work of which no one is aware, but that needs to be done, meanwhile dealing with some very difficult people and very tough situations. These are the kind of people we need working for us, so these are the kind of people we must seek out, ask to run for office, and then... we must stand behind them and help them accomplish our mutual goals.

We are rarely if ever going to find a leader that we will agree with on every single issue, but we need to find good solid people with the skills, the passion, the commitment and the character to lead us well. When we elect them we need to support them and jump in behind them and pick up some of the work. We are going to continue to have

struggles and controversies in this industry, but I think that each of us individual farmers can make a huge difference by choosing good leaders, supporting them, and then individually contributing some of our time toward our local and national organizations.

We have some amazing people working for all of us in this industry. We have many, many people who regularly spend 20 to 40 hours a week quietly working on things that are greatly benefiting all of us. Of course they are not paid for any of this work, and in addition they often are not recognized and appreciated as they should be. They are not in this for self-promotion, so many of us overlook them and never know what they are doing.

I would encourage you to seek out these hardworking people—the backbone of this industry—and when you find them, let them know that you recognize how large their contribution is and that you support them in their efforts and will offer some time to help them as needed. Regularly express your appreciation and when it comes time for nominations and elections, promote these people who have proven themselves to be truly working for all of us.

We as individuals often feel helpless, but in fact we can accomplish a lot. It takes extra effort and time to think through issues and address them carefully and reasonably. It again takes extra effort and time to determine which individuals are truly working for us and should be supported as leaders. But if we will take that time, we can make a difference. We can elect leaders locally and nationally that will represent us well, will work hard for us, and will lead the alpaca industry to new heights.



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