



Unveiling and breaking the cycle of lateral and vertical aggression in agricultural sciences

By Amanda J. Ashworth

| May 16, 2022

Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Feodora.

Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Feodora.

An issue that some early career members may have experienced during their career is lateral and vertical aggression. Lateral and vertical aggression is behavior that characteristically occurs within marginalized groups where members undermine each other typically as a result of being oppressed (i.e., the oppressed become the oppressors). The difference between lateral and vertical aggression is that lateral aggression occurs between colleagues on the same power level while vertical aggression is directed downward between colleagues with different levels of power (manager to subordinate). Common behaviors include, but are not limited to, uneven or unfair treatment, dismissiveness, work interference, incivility, passive

aggressiveness, and discrimination, which can be overt or covert and direct or indirect. Research suggests that gender bias causes women and minorities to see each other as competitors for limited leadership opportunities and, when internalized, to hold each other to unattainable standards.

Social scientists have demonstrated that these types of workplace covert incivility can manifest to multiple stressor impacts, including reduced job satisfaction, burn out, increased organizational costs, attrition, and higher turnover. Social scientists have also found that lateral and vertical aggression is most prevalent in high-stakes academic environments with low resources and situations where low decision-making power exists, leading to low institutional faculty satisfaction and retention challenges.

This type of behavior, albeit perhaps biologically engrained, may stem from the deep-seated thought (real or perceived) that “there’s only room for one of us in leadership.” This belief in scarcity of powerful positions for women and minorities can fuel competition and ultimately lateral and vertical aggression. This can make minority members see each other as threats rather than allies.

Interventions to Reduce Incivility

So what can be done about it? Three interventions are outlined below to reduce covert and overt incivility in academia.

First, as early career members, we can ask ourselves, *Am I doing it too?* The first step at combatting lateral and vertical aggression is awareness and admitting how it might be showing up in your own lab group, research program, or among your collegiate cohort. Self-evaluate how you might subconsciously get territorial or competitive—as acknowledging it is the first step to short-circuiting the behavior. Second, find ways to support minorities, which will remove the stigma that “only one of us can succeed.”

Take time to mentor minorities, which will bolster a more supportive and inclusive collegial setting. Lastly, if you see lateral aggression, call it out in a respectful and professional manner.

These three actions collectively have the ability to systemically create a culture of respect and break the cycle of lateral and vertical aggression in agricultural sciences. Agriculture is a field that is increasingly diversifying, and building on the strengths of this diversity will make for a stronger, more collegial scientific community. We all have one common goal of helping feed the world and improving the livelihoods of farmers around the world. Addressing any issue that improves early career member satisfaction in the work environment will only help us achieve that goal.

[More careers & education](#)

[Back to issue](#)

[Back to home](#)

Text © . The authors. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Except where otherwise noted, images are subject to copyright. Any reuse without express permission from the copyright owner is prohibited.