



# Growing Leaders

## Are you tending the soil, watering and weeding?

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**M**y grandmother could grow anything. Her front yard was always blooming with lilies, roses and all kinds of fragrant wonders. Her back yard was brimming with vegetables worthy of her South Carolina roots — there were collards, zucchini and tomatoes. She also helped us grow in character, compassion and commitment to a greater good.



No, this is not a sentimental tribute to my dear, departed Mary Scott. Instead, it is a short reflection on what is required to grow leaders.

Like my grandmother's abundant gardens, many organizations are chock full of talented, bright people committed to the organization's strategic intent and operational objectives. These are the organizations that understand the value of investing in people. Like my grandmother, they see limitless potential in what others may discard. These are the organizations that use mentoring to build bench strength. Mentoring, be it formal or informal, enables growth on the part of the mentor and the protégé. This is a low-cost, high-impact developmental opportunity that just about any organization can use to bolster its talent store. And, mentoring is a very viable tool that will enable you to begin succession planning.

### Tend the Soil

These talent-rich organizations go beyond investing to cultivating the organization. Before anything or anyone can thrive and grow, you have to tend the soil. That means weeding, tilling and fertilizing. Let me kill the metaphors for a moment and make this very practical: It's difficult for the best and brightest to burgeon when they are surrounded by lackluster dimwits. If your organization has more than its fair share of low producers who are missing the basic components required for success, weed them out. These are people who need to be directed to their right livelihood (and it may not be with your dealership).

Beyond weeding, senior leaders have to till the earth by moving people around in the organization. Who said a sales manager doesn't need to spend time in the service department? And who said a service

manager doesn't need to comprehend back office pressures? This kind of cross-pollination allows your managers and supervisors to gain greater depth of knowledge about the entire enterprise. They will be far less myopic and have a better grasp of your strategic intent.

And fertilize you must! It is essential that leader wannabes have the training and education

that they need to grow. Take advantage of the opportunities that the Business Technology Association (BTA) offers for learning. Send people from all levels of the organization to its education sessions. Make sure you are also offering plenty of on-site training, customized to meet your unique needs. But be careful; training is not the cure for every organizational ill. It should be partnered with mentoring, functional cross-training within the dealership and other developmental initiatives. Training should also support your strategic plan. In order for it to be an effective tool it must be linked to larger organizational goals.

### Water and Weed

Back to Grandma — she did not leave her precious vegetation to fend for itself. She spent a lot of hours watering and weeding. Many organizations make the mistake of hiring the right people, but then placing them in less-than-optimal situations and leaving them to fend for themselves. Pay attention to your managers and supervisors. Listen to their concerns. Use their input to better the enterprise. This builds the confidence of your new crop of leaders. It tells them that they matter to the organization and to its leadership.

The last thing I learned about growing people and vegetables is this: You have to chill out and be patient. Enjoy some time in the shade. Sip a little lemonade. Don't expect your leaders of the future to possess competencies that even you have yet to master. It takes time, trial and error to develop and refine skills. Mistakes can, will and should happen. Use those mistakes as teachable moments. Don't forget, it's up to you, the senior leader, to create the right kind of climate. A healthy organizational climate is characterized by flexibility, commitment to a

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common purpose, high standards and rewards (adapted from “Leadership That Gets Results,” by Daniel Goleman, *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2000). Just as patience is required to grow leaders, it is also a key ingredient in reshaping the culture. A culture that supports leadership development is one that encourages innovation, experimentation and constant learning.

Don't think that tending the soil, watering and weeding are enough. You may have to do a little transplanting from time to time. Even the heartiest flora will not survive untenable terrain. It is important to know enough about your up-and-coming leaders to be able to place them in environments where they can survive and flourish. Creative types often don't enjoy stifling routines. Analytical types may relish the complex problems presented in the back office. Be sure that you have the right people planted in the right places.

### Enjoying Blossoms

I confess that I did not inherit my grandmother's green thumb. I treat my garden like many of you may be inclined to treat your up-and-

coming leaders. I forget that I planted bulbs, so they never get bulb food. (When was the last time you had a comprehensive system for training and education? You're forgetting your bulbs, too.) Since I hate weeding, I pretend the weeds are some special hothouse vegetation that I'm lucky to have. (Don't act like you never ignore the problem people — we both know better!) Even in the heat of summer, I often have little time for watering. (Hey, you may have been so focused on sales that you've forgotten about organizational culture and climate.)

Like most of you, I am not acting with malicious intent. My priorities just are not aligned with my little postage-stamp-size garden — I'd rather be writing. Be sure that your priorities are aligned with growing people. It's an important way to make your organization blossom. ■

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