

The Secrets to “Growing” Great Employees

As an organizational development consultant and executive coach for the past 25 years, Erika Andersen has helped CEOs and top professionals develop their employees at some of the best-managed companies in the world, including MTV Networks, Bank of America, Comcast, and Molson Coors Brewing. What she’s learned is that many highly skilled executives and entrepreneurs have no idea how to develop successful, productive employees.

Andersen writes, “You’re taught how to be a lawyer or a doctor—you go to law school or medical school. But most managers simply get promoted or launch their own company—and are magically expected to know how to manage people. That’s why bosses often end up wasting time on management missteps—and making themselves and their employees less happy and productive in the process. Until they learn how to find, hire, and develop great employees, it’s hard for them to free up time to build the business or even enjoy their own lives.” In her new book *Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers* (Portfolio, 2007), Andersen uses gardening as a metaphor for successful management, explaining why becoming a skilled people manager is worth the investment of effort and resources, and how managers can develop the skills they need to grow great employees. So, as a manager, how do you make your garden grow? Andersen offers these five strategies:

- 1. Remember that there is no such thing as a successful one-minute gardener.** If you tend it consistently, your garden will thrive. Neglecting a garden for months at a time or trying to do it all at once simply doesn’t work. Just as gardens need a consistent cycle of support, employees thrive with skillful and consistent attention and wither without it. As a manager, regular maintenance is critical, from clarifying employee responsibilities to giving feedback. Remember, even high-performing employees need maintenance if they are to continue to thrive.

- 2. Prepare the soil by listening.** The secret of good gardening lies in proper preparation of the soil. Even the highest quality plants will wither and die unless you provide them with a rich base. For a manager, listening to your employees is akin to preparing the soil. It establishes an open, nourishing environment that allows ideas and people to flourish. Unfortunately, when some people become managers, they may neglect their listening skills; they think they're supposed to talk and the employees are supposed to listen! But listening is essential to a manager's success. It gives you the chance to find out what people know and don't know, what has and hasn't been done, and where there may be concerns or misunderstandings. Most importantly, it creates an atmosphere of mutual respect—and that's when employees put down roots and grow.
- 3. Maintain the right mindset.** Just as a successful gardener approaches the garden with confidence and care, believing in the power of nature and his or her own skill, a good manager needs to believe in employees' potential and want to help them succeed. Without cultivating this attitude, it's nearly impossible to create a "garden" of thriving and productive employees.
- 4. Don't be afraid to prune.** Gardeners prune plants to encourage them in the right direction and to create more frequent blooms. Similarly, managers need to urge their employees in the right direction by providing both positive and corrective feedback. The key is to offer examples that focus on an employee's specific behavior, so that he or she will understand your comments and be able to act on them.
- 5. Reevaluate when something's not working.** Some plants are invasive and impede their neighbors' growth. Others simply don't thrive where you put them, despite your best efforts. Sometimes even excellent leaders have employees who don't succeed and need to be moved for a better fit, either within the company or out. Skillful managers minimize damage to the rest of the team and the organization by being able to know when to cultivate, reassign, or terminate employees in a way that's fair and respectful.

For more information about Erika Andersen's book, *Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers* (Portfolio, 2007), visit www.growinggreatemployees.com