

Why team building is out and team growing is in



The old model of “building” a great team is outdated.

The concept of growing a team instead of building a team has been around a long time. It seems to have started with Frederick P Brooks in his book “The mythical man-month” written over 30 years ago. He believed that the “building metaphor has outlived its usefulness” and that “the conceptual structures we construct today are too complicated to be accurately specified in advance and too complex to be built faultlessly, then we must take a radically different approach”.

So why do we persist with the term “team building”? I believe it’s because it’s easier for many technical managers to deal with inanimate objects than it is to deal with people. Building involves taking materials and logically turning them into something productive. You can determine in advance what you want to achieve and, with the right skills and equipment, reproduce an exact replica of a blueprint.

People aren’t like that. Just because someone has the skills to perform a role doesn’t mean they will perform it. Just because a reporting structure should work doesn’t mean it will. Just because you give someone the title of manager doesn’t mean they can manage. Things get in the way. Things like personalities, past experiences and perceptions.

We have moved on from the industrial age and are now in the information age. People are at the heart of most organisations. Today, most successful businesses are all about intellectual capital not capital works. So stop treating people like pieces of wood you can build into a structure and start treating them like living beings that will naturally grow if given the right conditions.

Like a good garden, what makes a good team comes down to intangibles and most technical managers aren’t good at dealing with them. They want the black and white, right and wrong, one size fits all solution. Gardeners know that doesn’t work. They know you can put five plants in the same garden bed, four will thrive and one will die. Often there is no logic to it, just like with people. You can do all the right things . . . give them good soil, water them, give them regular fertiliser and protect them from pests and they will still die! That’s nature. Just like you can’t command a plant to grow faster, you can’t command a person to work harder.

So let’s stop talking about team building and start talking about team growing. Let’s look at what we can do to let people naturally develop rather than force them to fit neatly into a predetermined size and shape.

As a keen gardener and someone who advises managers on employee engagement, I can see that there are many similarities between creating a thriving garden and creating a thriving organisation. Whether you have one pot plant sitting on your desk (one employee) or a plot of land that would rival the botanic gardens (many employees) the basic rules are the same. Get it right and your plants will thrive (your people will grow). Get it wrong and you will be left with a dead and dying garden (high turnover or, even worse, high disengagement). Gardening can be a rewarding pursuit. There is nothing better than seeing plants grow and it’s the same with people.

It can also be hard work and involve a long gap between effort and result. The similarities to managing people are obvious.

So learn some lessons about leadership from mother nature. Here are my top 10 to get you started.

1. You can't have engaged leaders in a poor culture . . . you can't grow plants in bad soil
2. We pick people for leadership roles for the wrong reasons . . . wrong plant in wrong location simply because we like the look of it
3. New leaders need assistance and support . . . plants need help to get established too
4. A leader in the wrong position can do damage . . . the wrong plant can potentially become a weed
5. Bad habits from leaders rub off on their people . . . like pests and disease moving from plant to plant
6. The right leaders provide staff with shelter from the organisational elements . . . like a tree shading smaller plants
7. You need to remove the barriers to help leaders grow . . . plants grow better when you give them space
8. Sometimes leaders outgrow their role and need to move on . . . sometimes plants need to be relocated to thrive
9. You always need to be cultivating new leaders . . . you need plants in all stages of development to keep your garden healthy
10. If leaders aren't growing they are dying . . . the law of nature, especially when it comes to plants

If you want to know more about my workplace gardening philosophy download your free ebook on "Growing engaging leaders" from www.letsgrow.com.au.

I believe that those organisations that will thrive into the future are the ones that embrace the concept of helping their people grow rather than sticking with the outdated model of trying to build a team. Are you going to be one of those organisations who are forging ahead or are you going to be left behind as others around you learn the secrets to thriving in changing times? Make an investment now in the future of your people. Become a workplace gardener and watch your organisation bloom!



Karen Schmidt from Let's Grow! describes herself as a workplace gardener who can help your business bloom by growing your managers into engaging leaders. To book Karen for your next conference or professional development event contact her on 0411 745 430 or visit www.letsgrow.com.au.

