



Growing Great New Managers

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Imagine, for a moment, that you've been put on an island and handed a sack of rice, some vegetable plants, and a chicken. "Good luck," says the person who brought you there. "You'll be responsible for growing your own food now; I know you've never done that before, but I have every faith in your ability." Then he gets in the boat and leaves, merrily waving goodbye.

Crazy, right?

Why wouldn't he at least stay to get you started that first growing season, helping you develop the skills you need to plant and nurture your veggies and rice, and keep your chicken alive and laying. Odds are good that you might starve before you figure it out for yourself. I think any of us would say the person who put you in that position is at best misguided, and at worst—criminally negligent.

And yet, a version of that is happening every day, all over the country. Thousands of brand new managers are handed a couple of employees and told, in effect, "You'll be responsible for managing these people now; I know you've never done that before, but I have every faith in your ability. Good luck!"

How odd this is. If you're going to be a lawyer, you go to law school. If you're going to be a doctor, you go to medical school. If you're going to be a manager, you get promoted one day, and you're magically supposed to know how to manage.

Now, I could kind of understand this if it didn't make any difference: if people didn't care how they were managed, and if their performance didn't depend at all on how they were managed. But they do and it does. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, in my experience, it's really difficult for a business to get consistently good results if its employees are badly managed.

So, what can we do about this? You and I aren't going to be able to solve this far-reaching organizational problem in the course of our conversation here together, but here's what I'd like to do. I want to offer you an overview of the skills and practices that make up the "cycle of support" of good people management. I hope to give you a sense of what it is, why it's important, and even a bit of how to do it. Since I've begun with the gardening metaphor, I'll keep using it; I've found it works very well.

Let's get started.

PREPARING THE SOIL

Every gardener knows that preparing the soil is the first and best secret of successful gardening. No matter how good the seeds or how well you care for them, if the soil hasn't been loosened and enriched, in order to create the best possible environment, not much will grow. I believe that listening is the management analog of soil preparation, the foundation for all future success. This flies in the face of common wisdom: most of us assume that once we become managers, we're supposed to stop listening. We think manager = answer-person. I suggest that the single most useful thing you can learn to do as a manager is stop talking and start listening. Here's one quick, practical step you can take to get you headed in the right direction: Ask before answering. When an employee comes to you wanting a solution to a problem, pause for a moment before responding, and instead of just leaping into answer-person-problem-solver mode, ask a question. Not a fake I'm-supposed-to-ask-a-question-here question, but a real one. For instance, you might ask, "What have you done so far to try and solve this problem?" or "What do you think we should do?" or even "What would success look like here—that is, what do you hope to accomplish by solving this problem?"

A bunch of great things will happen as a result of your doing this. First, your employees' own problem-solving abilities will be strengthened. For them, asking you for the solution is the easy way out; having to think through it themselves is harder, but ultimately better for them (they grow professionally); you (they become less dependent on you); and the company (it's always better for a company to have more people who are capable of solving problems). Second, it lets your employees know that you think they have good brains; that they're capable of solving problems; that you expect and require that they will contribute to the success of the department or the business. Doing this (and then incorporating their ideas into the final solution) communicates trust and respect more powerfully than a hundred wall posters about trust and respect! Finally, it will allow you to find out essential information, so you don't offer solutions that are unrealistic or have already been tried...thus helping assure you don't lose whatever credibility you may now have in one fell swoop.

PLAN BEFORE YOU PLANT

Good gardeners think through the kind of garden they want to create before they start buying plants. And having decided what they're trying to create, they buy plants that will suit their purpose. For instance, if a gardener determines that she wants to create a small shade garden of low-growing plants with beautiful foliage—he or she will then know it's not a good idea to go and buy sunflowers!


In the same way, good managers get clear about the kind of team, department, or business they're trying to create, and then choose the right employees to help them create it. For instance, let's say that you're running a production department in a company that creates life-saving medical devices. You want to create a team that's highly organized and efficient—there's no room for error. You'd look for employees who were precise, disciplined and liked order and rigor. Now let's say, instead, that you're the CEO of a small start-up company that's inventing children's toys. You want to build a team that's loose and free-thinking. You'd look for employees who are creative, flexible and playful.


Imagine a candidate applies to the medical devices company who has all the right technical skills, but is creative, flexible and playful. What do you think will happen if he's hired? Right: he might be able to do the actual job, but he'll feel out of place, and he'll probably not succeed—he's the wrong plant for the garden, and there's not much you can do about that.

PICKING YOUR PLANTS

So, once a gardener has decided what kinds of plants she needs, there's an easy next step. She just goes to the nursery or garden center, and reads the tags on the plants. They give her all the information she requires about the conditions that plant needs, so she can fairly quickly tell whether it's likely to do well in the kind of garden she's creating. Unfortunately, job candidates don't come with plant tags (resumes are kind of like plant tags, but they're fairly limited...basically they just say "I performed really well in another garden, which may or may not be anything like your garden, but you have no real way of knowing").

So, what's a good manager to do? Interviewing is your best way to find out how an employee will do in your "garden." Unfortunately, most managers are (self-admitted) poor interviewers. Here are two things you can do to immediately make yourself better at this important skill:

 **Shut up.** Most interviewing managers talk way, way too much (I think it's part of that answer-person thing I mentioned earlier). They lapse into trying to sell the person on the job and the company, or maybe they're just uncomfortable with the candidate's discomfort. Whatever the motivation, just stop it. You're supposed to be finding out about them.

 **Don't ask questions to which there are obvious right answers.** Interviewers tend to ask questions like, "We really expect everyone we hire to be pretty self-directed, and not require a lot of handholding. Would you be OK with that?" Unless you're brain-dead, or really don't want the job, the only possible answer is some version of "Yes." Instead, the interviewer might ask something like, "What style of management works best for you—how do you like to be managed?" There isn't a right answer here—the person has no choice but to tell you what's true for them (or what they think you want to hear, if that's the sort of person they are), but—in any case, you'll get a lot more data on which to base your hiring decision.

NOT TOO DEEP AND NOT TOO SHALLOW

When a gardener has chosen his or her plants, the next step is to make sure they're planted well—not too deep and not too shallow. In the same way, it's important to start new employees off on the right foot by making sure they're "planted" at the right depth. An employee who's not given key information is "planted too shallow," and will have a hard time getting what he or she needs from the organization in order to grow. An employee who's overloaded with information and unrealistic expectations is "planted too deep," and is likely to suffocate—paralyzed by too much, too soon. One way to help yourself do this well: remember that almost everyone in a new situation wants to know three things: who's important to their success, what's expected of them, and how things get done in this particular culture. If you focus on conveying just these things—being careful to stop when the person looks glazed or starts to drift—you (and they) will probably be OK.

THE GARDENER'S MIND

Successful gardeners have a certain mindset: they trust in their own skills and they trust in the power of nature; they know that rain falls, the sun shines, and seeds grow. They know that nature and their plants will do a lot of the work, and that they'll need to help nature along and take best advantage of it. The mindset of a successful manager is very similar: he or she believes in people's potential and wants to help them succeed. I feel very strongly that if you're a manager, and you have an employee about whom you cannot say "I believe in your potential and I want to help you succeed," then that person shouldn't be working for you. Really, think about it: if you have people working for you, and you don't believe they're capable, and don't feel motivated to help them...how likely is it they're going to succeed? Have you ever had the experience of having a boss who didn't believe in you or

care about your success? I have—and every day at work was like walking up a hill with rocks on my back. If you really find yourself not believing in an employee, or not wanting to support his or her success, either question those negative assumptions and change your mindset, if it's realistic to do so—or free him or her to do another job, working for another boss!

A MIXED BOUQUET

High-yield gardening requires attending to the individual needs of each kind of plant, and growing great employees requires the same thing. All too often, leaders use a “one size fits all” approach to managing and developing their employees—which may work well for some, but won't work at all for others. There's a wonderful model called “Social Style” that provides practical insights into how different people prefer to work and to be managed. It would take too long to explain it here, but I'll share one tip, based on what I've learned from using this model: don't assume that everyone is wired like you. Here's what I mean by that: we tend to assume that other people have the same preferences and motivations that we do—so when they do things, we assume it means the same as if we were doing it. I'll give you an example. Let's say there's a manager who's very fast-paced and gregarious. And she has an employee who's more moderately paced and reserved in his interactions. The boss might look at the employee's quiet behavior and assume he's uncomfortable or doesn't like the people around him—because that's what it would mean if she were acting like that. For her employee, it doesn't mean that at all: that's just how he behaves normally. So, as a manager, it's helpful to remind yourself that your employees may see the world and operate in it very differently from you—and still be effective. The point is not to get everyone to act like you; it's to help them be productive and content acting like themselves!

STAKING AND WEEDING

There are day-to-day tasks a gardener does to keep a garden thriving—staking, weeding, spraying, pruning, etc. They may not be the most fun or creative aspects of gardening but they nip problems in the bud and give plants a chance to bloom. Two managerial equivalents of these not-fun-but-necessary maintenance tasks are the skills of making agreements and giving feedback.

Research has shown that one of the things employees most need, in order to feel positive and be productive, is to know what's expected of them. That's what making clear agreements is about. Too often, managers give employees only the most general and ill-defined sense of what they're supposed to be doing, and—more important—of the results they're being held accountable for achieving. It's kind of like sending someone in to run a race without telling them where the finish line is, who they'll be competing against, or what the rules are! If you want people to feel good about their jobs and get great results, it's completely worth the investment of time to get clear with them about “what success looks like”—that is, what you expect them to do, why and by when; to give them the chance to weigh in with any questions, concerns or ideas; to make sure you both have the same understanding of the agreement; and, finally, to support a successful outcome by doing whatever you said you'd do —provide resources, give feedback, etc.

Which brings us to the topic of feedback. Most managers find giving corrective feedback the hardest part of their job; they worry about the employee's reaction, and they just don't know what to say. They tend to hope if they don't say anything, the problem will just go away—but it rarely does. So, what's a manager to do? One very useful thing is to learn to give feedback about people's behaviors—instead of about their mental state. Here's an example. Managers all too often (if they give corrective feedback at all) say things like “you have a poor attitude.” First of all, by saying that you're assuming you know what's going on inside their head—and regardless of whether your assessment of their mental state is accurate, a comment like that is almost guaranteed to make people feel defensive....you've basically just told them they have a character flaw! Second, you're

giving people absolutely no indication of what you want them to do differently: what would having a “good attitude” look like? Your guess is as good as mine.

Instead, try doing a thing we call “camera check”: take a mental videotape of the person doing what you call “having a bad attitude.” What do you see on the imagined tape? You might see him or her showing up late for work, saying negative things about other people or about the company, consistently refusing to help colleagues when they ask for support. Those are things you can tell the person: “John, I notice you’ve come late to work several times over the past month, and I’ve overheard you saying some pretty negative things about Susan and Jeff to other employees.” It’s still not easy to hear—but it’s a LOT easier to hear than “you have a bad attitude”—and it’s much clearer what you want the employee to do differently.

LETTING IT SPREAD

The most lush and exuberant gardens are those allowed to spread—to indulge in their natural tendency to expand into new seedlings and new shoots. One of the most powerful ways to grow great employees is to delegate authority and responsibility to them—to “let them spread.” Most managers have had bad experiences with delegation: I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard managers say same version of, “Well, I try to delegate—but it’s so much easier just to do it myself.” The problem is, it may be easier in the short run, but in the long run it limits your effectiveness (if you’re still doing all the work your employees should be doing, that doesn’t leave you much time to do the bigger stuff) and it limits your employees’ growth and opportunity... and if that happens too much, over a long enough period of time, they’re likely to leave.

The answer is to learn how to delegate well. One important tip for delegating well is: give autonomy according to experience. Here's what I mean. Let's say you want an employee to take over the management of a yearly event. You know that he has a lot of experience in some parts of this kind of project: let's say, for instance, he's great at organizing and executing a detailed plan. On the other hand, you know he's hasn't had much experience at dealing with clients, and that's also an important part of this event. So, when you're delegating this project to him, you might say something like: "Gary, I know you're really well organized and excellent at making sure that all the details are in place. So let's just check in weekly on that, and you can come to me if there are any problems. I also know that the client contact part of this project will be new to you, so I really want to stay closely involved there: let's do the first couple of client meetings together, and debrief afterwards. Then, when you feel ready to try one on your own, we'll talk through it first to make sure you've thought of everything that's important. " In other words, you give autonomy according to experience. Delegation done in this way is far more likely to produce the results you're hoping for: things coming off your plate, yet still done well; employees taking on and succeeding at new challenges.


PLANTS INTO GARDENERS


In being a leader, there's a possibility that doesn't exist in gardening; some of your plants have the potential to become gardeners! You have the opportunity to help your employees develop new skills and abilities, including management and leadership. There's a model for coaching that builds on some of the skills we've already discussed: listening, feedback and delegation. I won't go into the whole model here, but one thing that's important to remember: most people want to grow and develop, but they need some help to do so. As the manager, you're in a unique position to offer that help: you probably see their professional strengths and weaknesses more clearly than anyone else in their life—and you can support them to find the resources and knowledge to achieve their potential. If you wonder whether you have time to be a coach—given your day job—just remind


yourself that the investment of time and energy you make in this realm will have a big return: skillful, independent employees who respect, trust and like you, and who most likely want to support your success as you've supported theirs!


HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Making a wonderful garden requires balancing the gardener's effort with the power of nature. As applied to developing employees, this means finding the appropriate balance between your responsibility and the employee's responsibility. What are the employees' responsibilities? In my mind, these are the things good employees do, and that you can legitimately expect from any employee:

 **They are responsive to feedback.** Sure, everybody gets defensive now and then, but overall, employees are responsible for listening to your feedback, taking it in and trying to understand and apply it.

 **They keep their agreements.** This may seem blindingly obvious, but think about it—how many times have you said or heard someone say, “I’ve asked her to do that a dozen times, and she keeps saying she will –but then she doesn’t do it!” Employees are responsible for doing what they say they’ll do.

 **They manage their own growth.** They may need, and will generally appreciate, your help—but they know it's their responsibility to develop, and they don't expect you to make it happen for them.

 **They are good company citizens.** Generally speaking, they don't make it difficult for those around them to succeed; they're honest, consistent and respectful in their interactions; they don't try to accomplish their own goals at the expense of others. None of us are perfect, but employees are responsible for making sure that they're not doing stuff that makes others dread to come to work with them!

SOME PLANTS DON'T MAKE IT

Sadly, even the best gardeners have some plants that don't thrive, despite their most skillful efforts. It's true of leaders, too; sometimes even excellent managers and leaders have employees who don't succeed. If you've done everything you can to support an employee's success (all the things we've talked about up till now) and it's still not working—and especially if the person isn't fulfilling his or her responsibilities as an employee—you need to let that person go. This is never easy (and shouldn't be; you're affecting this person's life in a powerful negative way), but you can do it in such a way as to create the least possible pain and stress for you, the person, your team and the company.

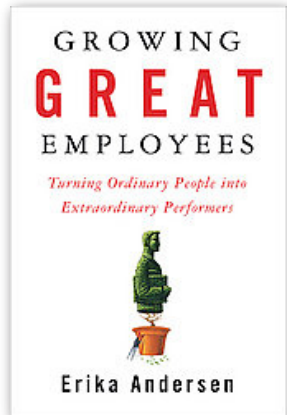
I almost hesitate to give a quick tip here, because it's so essential that you do it right. At the risk of sounding like I'm giving a shameless plug for my book, *Growing Great Employees*: if you're ever in the situation of having to fire someone, I encourage you to read Chapter 11, so you can get some good solid information about things to think about and do in order to help assure this difficult task goes well.

If I had to say just one thing about firing: be impeccable. This is not the time to wing it, or to indulge in your more petty or irritated side. Prepare well, and bring your highest and most mature self into this final conversation. And then, once it's over, stay impeccable: in dealing with your team, the person, and the company, make the separation as graceful, dignified and hopeful as possible.

THE MASTER GARDENER

Sometimes people ask me—“What’s the one mistake you wish managers wouldn’t make—the one thing you’d advise them to do differently?” I’ve thought about it a lot, and though there are lots of possible answers, the change I believe would make the most difference—to managers, to employees, and to organizations—would be for managers to approach the “people part” as a worthwhile and important endeavor. Rather than thinking of it as a necessary evil—something that they only focus on when things are going badly, something to do in the spaces between their “real job”—that managers would learn to manage well, with care and consistency.

If you do that, as a manager, you’ll not only derive the satisfaction that comes from practicing any craft to the best of your ability—you’ll also get to watch as your skills and attention grow great employees, and great results for you and for your business.



BUY THE BOOK

For more details or to buy a copy of Erika Andersen's *Growing Great Employees* [click here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erika Andersen has developed a reputation for creating learning and change processes and programs uniquely tailored to her clients' challenges, goals, and culture. She and her colleagues at Proteus International, the company she founded in 1990, offer practical methods and skills for individuals, teams, and organizations to clarify and move toward their hoped-for future. Much of Erika's recent work has focused on organizational visioning and strategy, executive coaching, and management and leadership development. She has served as consultant and advisor to the CEOs and top executives of corporations like MTV Networks, Molson Coors Brewing, Rainbow Media Holdings, Union Square Hospitality Group, and Comcast Corporation. Her work has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, German and French, and she has been quoted in a variety of national publications, including the *New York Times*, *Industry Week*, *Investors' Business* daily, and *Fortune*. Her book, *Growing Great Employees*, is published by Penguin Portfolio.

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