



Create and lead teams that produce and flourish.

Don't build teams... **Grow** them!

Forget about seats on a bus...think of a flourishing garden. We're not going for a ride, we're growing.

By Dion McInnis

Don't build teams...grow them!

There is something inherently wrong-headed with the concept of **building** teams: People are not inanimate materials to be put in places like bricks on a wall, forever to stay in position serving their purpose. People should be allowed to grow in their roles, and eventually out of them. Just as with plants, there are growth cycles; just as with the gardens, there are conditions that must be met and maintained to maximize the potential of each to produce beauty, nutrition and "seeds" for the future. **Forget about seats on a bus; think of a flourishing garden that produces for today and the future.**

Organizations of all types must be dynamic, adaptive and creative. Those are not characteristics of bricks, but of people. Plants adapt to conditions; bricks survive them. Plants chart paths as they seek sun and energy; passengers on a bus take a ride. By empowering team members and creating cultures that foster growth, organizations can leverage creativity to grow strong teams and help team members have fulfilled lives.

The secret is to see differently, change perspectives and grow authentically.

The following sections consider various aspects of the process required to develop and maintain a garden, using examples to show how to grow your team, program or organization: *soil quality, planting, germination, weeding, pruning and harvesting*. Consider this as a cycle, not a sequence that stops after the harvest.

Soil Quality

I used to think of myriad solutions to problems that I had with gardens. A garden show host in Houston reminds his listeners time and again to look at the soil. Its conditions are the first and last place to look. So it is with organizations. Take a look at conditions. Can your team members (employees, colleagues and volunteers) take root and grow? Is there nourishment for them to develop and to feed their interests and talents? Will their “fruits” be harvested or will they rot on the plant, i.e., will the organization use the fruits of their labors or ignore them? Long before there is fruit to be harvested, there must be rich soil from which the seeds can sprout, plants can grow and abundance be created.

Morale is analogous to soil conditions. If the morale—with the conditions stated above, and more—is bad, investing in professional development and other initiatives amounts to casting seed on stone. Some will have a chance to take root, but not many. The soil (the conditions of the organization) must be receptive to seeds (those trying to grow), conducive to growth (appropriate conditions to nurture and grow), and replenished between “seasons.”

The process begins at the...beginning! From the moment a job availability is posted, the organization can and should be clear about what they are looking for in the job and the ideal candidates to fill the position. The sterile bullets of a job description tend to not be as full of opportunity as the employer hopes the candidates will have. As an employer, do you let the candidates see into the future that you hope will occur when the right person is hired?

“We’re beginning to build a grove of orange trees. Asparagus need not apply.” Of course, you would never use that sort of description, but notice the clarity. This statement included a view of the future (a grove) of the desired harvest (oranges), and it included an example of what is not needed. While it is not easy to be that clear in writing job postings and position descriptions, it is important be clear about: what is desired, what the vision is for that position as it relates to the business’ future, and what the desired results will be. Don’t make these mere words agreed upon by a committee; bring them to life with actions.

When I would bring new employees into my unit, I would tell them a few key things on their first day: "Welcome aboard, we are glad to have you here to be part of a great team; these are things we saw in you that led to your hire; be sure that what you showed us during the interview was the real thing because if that wasn't really you, you won't be here long; and, the fastest way out of here is to mess with team chemistry." Those who had faked it during the interview or who tried to mess with the team chemistry did not last long...just as the asparagus has no place in the orange grove.

Clarity at the beginning, and reinforced along the way adds to building strong morale. Morale is a mindset that is developed over time, it is not an emotion that is boosted from time to time with perks, programs or platitudes. Bad soil that gets a lot of fertilizer may yield a harvest for a short period of time, but it will not last long nor will it be capable of accommodating changes in plans and expectations, i.e., now "crops" or plants at different times of the year and for different needs.

If morale is the soil of your organization/garden, consider what happens when it is not maintained, making it incapable of handling difficult times due to lack of stability, and rendering it incapable of producing. Think "Dust Bowl." Check out this [article](#), and think of how the morale of your organization relates to the business' ability to allow others to take root, and eventually produce.

Chances are unfortunately good that if you are the leader of the organization, you might be thinking, "This doesn't apply to me because my organization has high morale." CEOs have told me that time and again. And typically, they are overgeneralizing or they are simply wrong. Just as there are tests that you can take of soil to check its condition, there are ways to check the true condition of morale in your business.

Managers and C-level leaders might say, "I know morale is good. I see how happy they are." Of course people are acting positive around them! Simply going by appearances would be like the gardener saying, "The dirt is dark and dark dirt is good dirt so surely everything is perfect."

Good soil (good morale) enables and empowers growth, allowing for each plant to grow, cope with challenges, provide a harvest and ultimately provide for the future

through its effect on the soil and the production of seeds (the future). How's your business' " soil?"

Once the right candidate has been found to be placed in the conditions of the organization, he or she must be placed in ways like a plant: that encourage a successful start with strong roots and minimum vulnerability to things that may uproot it or diminish its growth. Don't think of simply placing someone in a spot on the bus. Even the term "onboarding" connotes simply getting someone onto the bus/ship/train metaphor for the business. Well-placed personnel have the right amount of light and water, appropriate nutrition, supportive conditions that remove weeds and other things that will choke them out, and appropriate harvesting or pruning that allows for maximum growth, harvest, beauty and success. Putting the right person in the right seat for a business trip doesn't work.

Soil needs to be prepared to accept seed, and too drastic of tilling can provide for short-term growth, but long-term disaster. "Breaking ground" a bit allows the seeds to find their places and take root; tearing up the soil damages it, and encourages destruction of its capabilities and the introduction of bad plants that further destroy conditions. Think of what happens when your business brings in new employees at any level. Does it tear up the soil (morale, culture and conditions) to allow for a quick sprouting or does it place the seeds in ways that allow for growth and change?

Everyone who has been in the workforce for any amount of time has encountered the highly disruptive style of planting that many organizations use when adding members to the team. Either the process is disruptive, or they allow the new employee to be disruptive, particularly in management positions. They come in and rototill everything that grew before them so they can plant their own garden. In the meantime, a lot of great things (people, projects) are "destroyed" and progress is set back. Granted, there are times when major changes are required; turning a patch of lawn into a robust vegetable garden, for example. There must be a purpose and a vision to the plans, however.

Soil conditions are critical to conduciveness for growth, too. Even good soil requires appropriate sunlight, water, fertilization, and tending (weeding, breaking the surface of the soil, protection from freezes).

Consider what your business does to assure that everyone on the team is getting what they need to stabilize, grow and “produce.” Also, what does the organization do to actively remove weeds, consistently break the soil to allow water and nutrients to reach the roots, and protect the plants (team) from dangerous conditions (layoffs, down times, high-pressure times, etc.)?

Good soil does not happen with a plant-it-and-forget-it mentality. Plants are switched out (rotated) to be sure that the soil is not depleted, and plants are placed together ([companion plants](#)) to rebuild soil, repel pests and protect against diseases. Putting the right plants together can create a more successful, strong, resilient garden. The same is true for the people in your organization. The right mix creates a mutually supportive environment that encourages growth, nourishment and success.

Planting

There are many options when starting a garden: plant seeds, start with seedlings, or transplant mature plants. So it is with your team: new talent, experienced members or seasoned individuals of the culture or brought in anew.

Each approach uses different methods, but each also requires specific techniques to maximize success. You plant a seed in a small hole that is likely not very deep in the ground; you plant a mature plant in a hole that is twice as large as the root ball. If you planted a seed in a hole as big as the one for root ball, the seed would not survive and you'd be wasting a lot of soil. Conversely, planting a mature plant in a teeny hole almost assures its death.

In businesses, the same situation occurs. New team members (seeds) thrown into deep, wide holes (those for experienced or higher level employees) will get lost and not have a chance to take root. Or experienced people placed in small holes will become root bound and die. Similarly, consider talent. Mismatching talent and potential to the "hole" can lead to overwhelmed and suffocated consequences...the antithesis of growth.

Match the method in which you "plant" team members with their ability to cope with it. Don't choose by the approach that is most convenient, but select by the one that best assures that the employee will take root, stabilize, grow and produce.

In the previous section, the topics of crop rotation and companion planting arose. A garden or farm that is robust, diverse and growing must change crops or plants from time to time. Businesses and organizations must do so, too. People come and go, depending on the needs of the business, but with each change is a commitment to growth. Even decades old vineyards are not left merely to their own devices to produce.

Germination

If you decided to start with seeds, then you chose to put time into the germination period. If you chose transplanting seedlings or mature plants, you committed to helping during the transition period. Or you should have. The same can be said for your team members; remember, they are not merely put in place to serve a role, they are placed to grow.

No matter what level a person enters an organization, time is required to begin to grow into the position and beyond. Nothing is static. Growth is dynamic. The long-term potential of a team member benefits from a good germination period. Organizations should look at how they bring on team members with an eye on the process of getting started (germination) not just the instructions for planting (orientation program).

With each seed, seedling or plant, comes instructions on how to be placed and cared for in order to grow. That is the equivalent of an orientation program. "Here is what you need, now just follow the instructions." Growth does not come that easily when employees are considered as living, breathing, aspiring, breathing, dreaming people and not merely a group of properly placed skillset holders to make for a better journey to the benefit of the business or organization. The logic and concepts apply to internal promotions or transfers, or new hires, and everything in between.

Forget "onboarding"; think "germination." What happens during germination for seeds or during the rooting phase for seedling and transplants? And how long does the process take?

Onboarding often assumes that everyone who gets on board will stay on board...on board for the ride. Germination more accurately describes the process, and therefore adjusts understandings about it. Not all seeds that are planted will turn into plants; not all seedlings that sprout will reach a mature state of producing; not all those that reach a state of production will be abundant; not all those that are abundant will be so forever. People are the same. Even with the best of intentions, they may not make it from seed to long-producing state; even with the best of attentions, they may not make it either.

Do your best to assure success but understand that all won't make it. Just like for the garden or farm, there must be regular attention given and tending provided. They aren't passengers; they are people.

Weeding

One of the most important tending functions is weeding. All the sunlight, water and nutrition can't undo the damage of weeds as they steal from the plants that we want to succeed. Eventually, weeds can overwhelm the garden or field, completely destroying the soil's ability. (Recall the first section about soil!)

Businesses, and their leaders and managers, must take a proactive stance when it comes to "weeding." Interestingly, most of things that are done to assure plant success in terms of nutrition, light and water, also invigorate the very plants— weeds—that can rob from the plants that are desired. Bad habits and processes then enable the weeds to eventually overtake the beneficial plants. Worsening conditions then lead to exacerbated weed production (see list of some of the weeds below) and new varieties creep in.

Consider the processes and methods that you and/or your business use to take care of employees. How do those actions also encourage the growth of weeds? Weeds must be prevented or pulled. As for the latter, timing is everything. A weed pulled at the wrong time can take with it the young seedling that can, with proper attention, become strong enough to endure the weed's removal.

At early stages of development, it can be hard to tell a desired seedling from a pesty weed. And without a trained eye and attention, weeds may develop fully before being identified as a problem. Good management of a garden requires knowledge, an attentive eye and diligence. As a leader, manager, owner or C-level, you should have these characteristics and expect them in those with whom you have given the responsibility to "tend the garden" of your company and its team members.

As with any garden, your business or organization has several persistent, common weeds. Prevent them or remove them, being careful of the timing of the latter.

Distractions (Latin name: Distractus from our purposus)

Some distractions are cultural in an organization, and some have to do with individuals' time management or management skills. Organizations and their managers should be on alert for the distractions that at first seem like part of the garden but become impediments to growth and productivity.

The manager who stands over an employee's shoulders as they print a document. The injection of events or meetings that "celebrate" success when they are only events to make managers feel good. The task force that meets for two years under the promise of action only to have their work ignored. The standing meeting led by someone who "hates meetings and only has them when they are needed," but has no purpose, actions or outcomes. The mandatory participation in faux team development gatherings. The manager who wants to make changes in perfectly acceptable documents just to prove that he or she is "better" than the employee. All these weeds could appear to have value if only glancing at the action, but they are weeds.

"Shared governance" (Latin name: Slowus downus, aka everyoneofus fingerprintis)

Some weeds stand alone or in small bunches before spreading. Their effect is not as disastrous until they have spread, and that takes considerable time and plenty of opportunity to uproot them. Shared governance forms a ground cover, capable of taking over and stifling an entire office, program, unit or organization.

This weed is very similar to *Indecision (Latin name: Youcant blameus)*, in that it permeates the garden and stifles almost everything that tries to grow, bloom and flourish.

While the culture of higher education is well known for its shared governance model, many organizations accept the plants of slow movement, multiple decision levels, need for consensus for nearly everything, and so on, to the point that most of the energy and nutrients in the garden are absorbed by the weeds that serve little purpose instead of those that have the chance to provide abundance for seasons to come.

Meetings (Latin name: Boredum infinitum)

Meetings are important, except when they are not. Meetings are a waste of time, except when they are not. For example, clover is a weed, except when it is being used to rebuild the soil. Tomatoes are a great, unless you plant it in the same place season after season, causing the soil to be ineffective for many plants. The point is, there is a time and place for everything.

Meetings can be good when the right players are at the table. Sometimes it means having representatives from all the pertinent offices onboard. Sometimes it means having the right cast of decision makers on hand to make decisions instead of needing to take the committee's decisions to the world of shared governance (see above).

Be cognizant of meetings—their purpose, frequency and who sits on them. If the meeting cannot address “why” or how,” don't have it. Why always precedes how. Why something is done (baking a cake, designing a building, organizing an event...anything!) determines how to do it. It is a birthday cake? Anniversary cake? Chocolate craving cake? Showcase cake? Munchies-fulfilling cake? Those cakes will be made in different ways because of why they are being made. All plans and actions should follow “why before how” and meetings should either help that process or be cancelled.

Reports (Latin name: Keepinem busyerata)

Reports share similarities with meetings: necessary when important and a weed when there is no value added. Reports should follow the guideline above: why before how.

Sometimes the report does indeed have an important purpose, but only the managers or owner or administrators know the purpose. Within reason, share the purpose of the report so those working on it have an understanding of the why and the how. Make sure the report is not another weed trying to look pretty and green but is actually only robbing the garden of resources and the gardener of time.

Ego (Latin name: Largis fragilis)

This weed is particularly troublesome. Frequently, the one charged with rooting it out is covered in it themselves, sort of like using a shovel covered in weed seeds to dig out a small, annoying weed.

The leader of the organization can help set the tone for tolerance for this weed, but the ego weed can take over a corner of the garden or an entire plot at an alarmingly fast rate.

A strong sense of ego can be important to an organization's health. An inflated or delicate ego can rapidly change the weed from isolated to ground cover.

One way to control ego is to feed it properly. Sometimes the employees who have the most overpowering or fragile egos are the ones who have not had their sense of worth appropriately fed and nourished. Try to deal with this weed by tending it, but if it gets out of control...pull it.

Communications (Latin name: Mudis moreclearis)

The Communications weed presents itself in various ways. Sometimes it can be a single sprout that strangles healthy plants near it, and sometimes it becomes pervasive. Good communications processes that are tended can help build a strong garden; bad communications processes soon become the kudzu of an organization, overwhelming it to the point that nothing is discernable. ([Kudzu](#) was first brought to the United States from Japan to help deal with erosion issues in the South, according to some sources. A little might be a good thing, but it took hold and overtook landscapes, turning them into nearly useless areas. It can be beautiful in appearance, but the land becomes nearly useless for anything else.) Unnecessary communications requirements or bad communications processes can become the weed that suffocates an organization.

Committees and task forces (Latin name: Wegotcha eternis)

Task forces are basically committees with a short life span and specific purpose. Both can be very important parts of an organization, but both can quickly turn into weeds that overwhelm and stifle those in the garden with potential to grow and bloom. Re-read the article about Kudzu above.

Think of your own.

Examine your office, unit, organization or program and look for the things that look like normal, healthy parts of your environment, but, on closer inspection, you see that they rob your team members of energy, nutrition and sustenance, and they prevent others from becoming productive as well as unnecessarily take time that could be better spent.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered." That may be true, but it doesn't mean that you should allow everything (or everyone) to grow unabated in your garden (organization) in hopes that someday it will prove to have some value.

Weeds are often considered feral plants and usually considered as a group, i.e., weeds are bad, ergo all weeds are bad. This is not true. There are many [beneficial weeds](#) that belong in a garden when managed properly. Consider the weeds in the garden that is your business, organization or office and realize that some may play an important role as long as they are kept under control and used properly. See differently, change perspectives, grow authentically.

Pruning

The strongest plants are the ones that are pruned and trimmed. Whether you're working with an oak tree, bonsai tree or basil herbs, or anything in between, it is important to use pruning to get rid of parts of the plant that are actually preventing it from reaching its potential. The approaches are as different as the desired outcome.

For your team members, consider the functions or habits that are preventing growth. Perhaps the employees have too much on their plates, or assignments not aligned with their talents, or the habit of making sure everything is perfect before proceeding (that is usually not "perfectionism" but fear of moving forward). Pay attention to behaviors and time management issues. There may be some pruning opportunities to improve growth and success.

Some trees require extensive trimming to keep them strong and make them better able to handle challenging conditions. It also helps them use nourishment and energy for the production of the desired harvest. Team members sometimes need significant changes to their work loads, responsibilities, nonproductive habits, etc., to make them more successful, too. Some plants require special attention after significant trimming to minimize shock. People are no different. For most plants, there are some times when pruning is beneficial and other times when the same actions can be damaging. People are no different.

Remember, the goal is to enable strong, productive, sustainable growth with each reaching its maximum potential within the needs and plans for the "garden." People and organizations are no different.

Harvesting

Plants produce and reproduce. Those are the reasons for gardens and farms, whether they exist for decoration or sustenance or commercial purposes. The “garden” of your organization is there to produce, and reproduce, too.

All the effort to prepare and maintain the soil, encourage strong germination and planting, remove weeds and prune strategically is for clear purpose: to produce (flowers, vegetables, herbs, etc.) and to sustain the future with healthy soil and seeds or strong stock for propagation.

It is important to celebrate the harvest, i.e., jobs well done, growth, accomplishments...large and small. These actions become part of the natural nutrition to stimulate more growth.

As individuals grow in an organization, they produce and they should do so with a longer-term goal of sowing the next generation of ideas, products, services, solutions, etc. An organization’s leadership, culture and processes play significant roles in assuring that the garden grows, flourishes, produces and provides the sustainability needed for fulfilled individuals and a strong, productive organization.

Quit looking for a seat in which to assign people, and start looking at how to grow a full, flourishing, diverse, productive, beautiful garden that is sustainable through all seasons of the year. Organizations and teams aren’t built...they are grown.

Dion McInnis

After spending more than a quarter century in leadership positions in higher education in the fields of alumni and community relations, development (fundraising), and communications, I bring to nonprofits experience, knowledge, wisdom, enthusiasm, optimism and motivation in both the strategic and tactical areas of visioning, strategizing, planning, and implementing transformative work. I bring to associations, chambers of commerce and organizations, the concepts and processes to engage and retain members. And I offer to individuals a chance to find fulfillment by opening themselves up to their creativity and personality.

I did not start my career as a fundraiser.

I believe those successes came largely due to the use of creativity, unleashing my abilities as writer, photographer, expressive and listener to connect to others, empower others, and grow opportunities. *It has become clear to me over the years that every individual, organization and business can benefit from empowering the creativity of individuals and teams, and that every individual can have a more fulfilling life by utilizing his or her call to create.*

These beliefs and all my concepts are based on a simple premise born in my life as an expressive (photographer and writer): ***See differently; change perspectives; grow authentically.*** It is these beliefs that led to the creation of the Empowered Creativity Institute.



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