

Leadership Lessons from the Vegetable Garden

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My time outside gives me much opportunity to think and reflect. With so much of my professional energy focused on leadership, I invariably consider applications from the garden to the workplace. After all, leadership also demands tons of care and consideration to make sure that each individual, team and organization is growing in synchrony and to their fullest potential.

Here is a list of leadership lessons from our work in the veggie gardens that I believe can teach us:

- 1. Prepare the soil** – For seeds to properly germinate, they need loose soil. This is particularly true for plants that produce underground yields such as carrots and potatoes. But between disuse and harsh weather conditions, earth becomes hard and compressed over the winter. Wise gardeners know that taking the time to properly loosen their soil will have a positive long-term impact on their crop. Preparation is also required for leaders who seek to help their people grow properly. When the workplace “soil” is cultivated through a mix of strong relationships and a “loose” environment that minimizes stress and allows for (if not celebrates) risk-taking, people can confidently spread out and produce great results.
- 2. Get the right ingredients** – Gardens require the right mix of components if they are to start fast. This includes quality seed, rich potting mix, compost, the right sized pots/planters, etc. The same holds true for an organization. If a leader wants to run a successful business, he/she needs to begin with the right elements, including a great group of talented, passionate people, lots of learning opportunities that build knowledge and efficacy, and a workplace layout that fosters balance between openness and the privacy/quietness needed for thinking and reflection.

3. **Choose a good location** – When planting, location matters. For starters, you need to choose a sunny area that will maximize the plants’ growth. If you are growing “viney” plants..., then planting near a wall, trellis, or other vertical support make sense. Other plants that demand easy access, such as green beans (for daily picking), or squash (to manage their growth pattern) should be sown where you can get to them. Location matters in the workplace as well, impacting everything from which locale and office space to select, to how to structure your work and meeting spaces to maximize employee productivity. You want a workplace that feels open yet still promotes interaction and a sense of connectivity. It is also critical that leaders have ease of access to facilitate them making their way through the space often.
4. **Use proper, quality tools** – It’s hard to get much done in the garden if you don’t have the right tools (rakes, spades, shovels, pruners, hoses, etc.) at your disposal. These tools help gardeners with everything from prepping and clearing the soil to digging, sowing, and so much more. Workplace tools, such as furniture, communication and collaboration systems, and teaching and learning materials, also have a huge impact on employee effectiveness.
5. **Sow early** – An early start to the growing season will predictably ensure a longer, more robust yield. Sowing early is a concept that can also be applied to relationship building and skills development. The sooner that a leader invests in their people and in building community, the sooner they can be assured to reap the benefits in the form of a more adept and synchronous workforce.
6. **Water often** – It goes without saying that plants need plenty of water to grow, particularly in the hot summer months. People, too, need plenty of “water”, in the form of feedback, guidance, compliments, and feedback. These keep them going and growing despite the increased heat (read: pressure and challenges) that may otherwise cause them to wilt and under-yield.
7. **Give every plant space to grow** – Plants that grow too closely together pull from the same food and water sources, leaving less for each of them. Moreover, they struggle to spread out their roots and stems, impacting their growth. In a similar sense, employees benefit from room to spread out. While teamwork is important, it is also critical for individuals to feel like they have an independent voice and that their uniqueness is valued and even encouraged.