

Work Daze: Weeds in the workplace

by *Bob_Goldman*

Here's a question: are you a flower or a weed? It's important that we answer this botanical query because a new management craze is growing in the rich loam of Mahogany Row. Your bosses are not satisfied with just being masters of the universe. Now they want to be master gardeners as well.

The management mania for gardening is the work of Erika Andersen, a "New York-based organizational specialist and executive coach" to firms like MTV Networks, Comcast and Bank of America. Not satisfied with spreading her own brand of fertilizer in the executive suite, Andersen has now published a book called "Growing Great Employees - Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers."

According to the press release that turned up in my electronic compost heap, the book was called "refreshing" by The Harvard Business Review. What Better Homes & Gardens thinks about Andersen's effort was not revealed, but I assume they were also positive. The book would certainly look good sitting on any executive's desk, and even a manager who didn't buy into her gardening philosophy could always use the handsome volume to throw at any tulip or milkwort who refused to grow. And it could come to that.

"You can't make employees grow any more than you can make plants grow," suggests the author. "What you can do: make sure you get the right people; 'plant' them in the right job, and create the optimal conditions for them to grow."

Of course, the whole gardening idea is simply a metaphor, and because I know you've never met a metaphor you didn't like, let me share the bounty of this strange harvest. If your boss is going to treat you like a plant, you don't want to be a daisy, Dudley. You want to be a Venus' flytrap.

"Prepare the soil by listening" is the first rule of the gardener/manager. Listening, Andersen instructs, "establishes an open, nourishing environment that allows ideas and people to flourish." Unfortunately, as our author points out, managers tend to do more talking than listening, a toxic dose of horticultural foolishness under which we lilies of the cubical tend to wither and die.

If your manager does not sufficiently nourish your soil, I suggest that you be upfront about it. Stand up like a sunflower at your next staff meeting and declare, "This little buttercup is parched and wilting. I need more nutrients if I am to grow and flourish." If your boss won't shut up or listen up, feel free to grab for the doughnuts. Even a buttercup has to eat to grow, right?

"Don't be afraid to prune" is another rule for the executive gardener, a grafting of the law of business with the law of the jungle that would scare legendary botanist Luther Burbank. "Gardeners prune plants to encourage

them in the right direction and for more frequent blooms," opines the author.

To avoid an unwelcome lopping off of your limbs, or your salary, I suggest you make sure you grow in the right direction, right from the start. It's called heliotropism where I come from and what it means, in workplace terms, is that you grow toward the sun - that is, the power source.

Since you are competing for executive sunshine with all the other plants in your garden, I suggest put your whole body into the effort. Lean sharply toward your boss when he or she walks by your cubical. You can actually lean into them when involved in a face-to-face. Get your stamen inches from their pistil, and it will not only show that you are looking for cross-pollination, but, very likely, freak them out so thoroughly that they will leave you alone.

"Re-evaluate when it's not working" is the final tidbit of gardening advice she gives. "Some plants are invasive and impede their neighbors' growth," writes the author. "They need to be moved for a better fit, either within the company or without." If your boss views you as a plant that would thrive better in the rich soil of the unemployment office, better make sure you start blooming. Otherwise, even the dandiest dandelion could be yanked out of the garden like an unwelcome weed.

If the situation is hopeless, forget headhunters. Submit your resume, including genus and species, to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and have yourself declared an endangered species. This helps. I haven't done any useful work in years and still, no boss would ever risk pulling out a "late blooming marigoldman."

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