

March 2006, Green Thumb Leaders

As another winter passes from our view (at least that's what the calendar says) and we head into spring, for a lot of people, it's time to start thinking about tending our garden. We can look into our garden and find that it is filled with various sights, both wonderful and terrible, but sights that probably mirror much of what are found in many companies. As noted author, international speaker and seminar leader Eileen McDargh suggests, to get one's garden back in shape and make it world class is exactly what every leader must do: seed, feed, and weed. How one performs these tasks depends upon the season, the unexpected turns of nature and makeup of the garden. Consider these gardening analogies as you look at your own organization and examine whether you are a "green thumb" leader.

- **Consider the "season"**
In today's global economy, it would appear that there is no season or anything that distinguishes night from day or work from play. Grow, grow. Sell, sell. But the "green thumb" leader watches the sky, reads the clouds, and can tell when there are shifts to indicate a new season. Bring products to market at the wrong time or introduce an idea without understanding the timing issues and the garden can quickly resemble a patch of scorched earth.
- **Give credence to the unexpected and control what you can control.**
The jet stream, El Nino or global warming trends that have spawned devastating storms and opposing droughts throughout the world are examples of our helplessness to control the environment. The same thing is true in business. Market turn downs, terrorism, energy prices - there are many things that can impact business. A "green thumb" leader takes all possible precautions and then remains flexible and ready for the unexpected.
- **Plant seeds and give space to the sowers.**
A "green thumb" leader knows that it is only through dialogue that ideas can sprout and take root. Instead of jealously guarding ideas, a "green thumb" leader with an eye toward growing a garden takes no ownership but rather seeks to find which seeds have merit. Where are the unexpected opportunities that can spring up if allowed to flourish? When newcomers bring ideas from other industries and businesses, are they welcomed or are they rooted out because "that's not how we do things here?"
- **Feed different plants differently.**
Not every plant is fed the same thing, yet all plants must eat. Roses need a systemic for the rust and mildew, along with a topical spray. Oranges just need some citrus fertilizer every now and then. A "green thumb" leader understands the truism that "nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals." Each employee, associate and stakeholder needs a unique blend of food. For many, it's

the opportunity to learn and advance in knowledge. For others, it's the engaging nature of the work itself that offers fulfillment. One size does not fit all.

- **Weeding is backbreaking work.**

The right tools alone will not do the trick. It's usually not enough to turn over the soil and think that you can empty the garden of weeds. In fact, if you don't roll up your sleeves and get on your knees, you may only be picking up the surface weeds. A "green thumb" leader hates this part of the task, but it's necessary. It means fact-finding. Accountability. And time. Not everything that is green belongs in the garden. Not every associate belongs with you. Getting the right people on board is the healthiest long-term fertilizer for a growing business.