

# Introduction

Here's a little experiment. Find any ten people who have some responsibility for others' work success—managers, HR staff, team leaders. One at a time, ask them what the hardest and most challenging part of their job is. Tell them they can say whatever they want, they don't have to be politically correct, and no one is writing down their answers. I'll bet you anything that nine out of the ten will say something about “dealing with the people stuff.” And the tenth will say something else, simply because he or she has only been in the job two weeks and hasn't gotten to the people-stuff part yet!

If life were fair, employees would be perfect. They would do exactly what we asked them to do, exactly when we asked them to do it—except, of course, for the fantastic ideas they would cook up on their own, the ones that would knock everybody's socks off, rejuvenate our tired products and services, and increase the bottom line by double digits. They would be cheerful-kind-brave-reverent-thrifty; they would evolve smoothly from entry-level to VP with no bumps along the way, handing us completed performance reviews once a year that perfectly reflect their efforts and results, and include their own entirely appropriate developmental plans. . . .

. . . .

Back to reality. Your employees are, like you and I, flawed and hopeful human beings whose success is at least partly dependent on your skill as a manager; human beings who will thrive with skillful and consistent attention and wither without it. Kind of like plants. (Thus the gardening metaphor you'll notice throughout the book, from which I intend to wring every last drop by the end of the final chapter.)

So, in that spirit, I've written this book for everyone who is responsible for helping another person succeed at work: managers, team leaders, human resource professionals, coaches, mentors, even managers-to-be. I want to share with you the best of what I've learned as a coach and consultant, a business owner, a manager of people from entry-level to highly skilled professionals—and as an employee.

## Why Now?

Part of what I've learned over the past thirty years is that the covenant between employees and companies has changed dramatically. When I was first starting out in the American work world, managers and the companies they represented expected that employees would simply show up and do what they were told—even if that meant moving every couple of years, families in tow, or working for a truly awful boss, or standing by while white males got plum jobs and plum salaries and everybody else didn't. Companies expected that people would do practically anything for their paycheck . . . and leave their dreams and feelings in a box by the door, thank you very much. Now—poor economies and other uncertainties notwithstanding—employees expect much more. They expect to be treated fairly, to be given both a clear sense of what their job is and the resources to do it well, and to be helped to grow and develop as professionals. And if they don't get these basic work-related needs met at one job, they are likely to look elsewhere.

In other words, employees (especially the more skilled and talented ones, the ones you want to keep) now tend to see themselves as having more leverage in the job equation. They bring something the company

wants (themselves, with all their skills, experience, and talents), and the company brings some things they want (a place to have influence and make money, but also opportunities to learn and advance, professional connections, and mentoring). Most of the things that make employees want to work for a particular company can be provided by a skillful manager. I can help you be that kind of manager.

## How We'll Approach This

When I began to mention to people that I was thinking of writing this book, the response was fascinating. Almost without exception, friends and colleagues in the business world would say something along the order of, “Oh, wow. When you finish it, I want a copy. I want ten copies.” And when I asked why they were so interested? Well, that takes us back to the beginning of this introduction: if you ask any ten people who have some responsibility for managing people what the hardest part of their job is . . .

So then, this book is a distillation of the teaching and coaching I've done with individuals and groups throughout my career. And it's a mix of the same elements I use in that corporate work: conversation, ideas, experiments, calls for self-reflection, and—perhaps most important—skill development. Managing well requires skills—just like cooking, or playing the piano, or, yes, gardening—and I hope to teach you some of those skills. Since you and I aren't sitting in a room together, we'll have to be a bit creative about how we work together to develop your people management skills. I've put the skills in an order that seems best to me, and in a number of cases the later chapters build on skills and understanding that will have been addressed in earlier chapters. But for those of you who don't like to read in a straight line, and who would prefer to dip in and out . . . please be my guest. Here's a quick summary of what's in each chapter:

**Chapter 1. Preparing the Soil:** This chapter focuses on listening, which I see as the foundation of managerial success. I'll use the gardening analogy of preparing the soil before planting a garden; no matter how good

the seeds or how well you care for them, if the soil has not been loosened and enriched, in order to create the best possible environment, not much will grow. Listening well (and sincerely) is the key to creating an environment that supports employee growth. I'll start by helping you become aware of how listening (or not listening) affects relationships and results. Then I'll show you how listening is a skill that can be learned and used by anyone who sees the benefit in doing so. You'll work through a skill-based model for listening, and I'll share a case study that helps show the different paths a conversation can take, depending on whether a manager listens or doesn't. This first chapter also contains a "bonus skill"; a skill of internal preparation called managing your self-talk—a way of making sure that what you say to yourself is supportive of the results you're trying to achieve.

**Chapter 2. Plan Before You Plant:** This chapter explores the importance of clarifying your needs and expectations—both organizationally and for a given job—before recruiting. I'll draw the analogy to the need for planning a garden in order to make it yield what you want. I'll first explain the idea of establishing core competencies, the key capabilities needed for anyone to succeed in your organization. Then I'll share an approach for identifying these core competencies in your organization, and I'll show how doing so can help ensure that you create the kind of workplace you want to have. I'll walk you through the process of creating your own core competencies. Then you'll learn the importance of describing a job clearly in order to find the right person for that job, and I'll offer a template and an approach for creating simple, practical job descriptions. I'll talk through a case study of how one client, faced with the need to hire someone for a complicated new job, used the job description tool to clarify his needs so he could find the right person.

**Chapter 3. Picking Your Plants:** How does a gardener know which plants will take root and flourish and which ones won't? That's the focus of this chapter—using the interview process to make sure that you're hiring the people most likely to succeed in the job, in your department, and in the company. You and I will focus on the skill of behavior-based

interviewing, the basic principles of which most managers can learn and apply for themselves. I'll help you use your core competencies and job descriptions to decide which questions you want to ask, and how to ask them. Most important, you'll learn how to make use of your listening skills so as to ensure the effectiveness of this approach. Finally, I'll explain and demonstrate (through examples) how to "rate" each interviewee in a way that's aligned with your core competencies and job description. This chapter will include actual case studies of ineffective and effective interviews—and their outcomes.

**Chapter 4. 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. This chapter focuses on how 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 about systems, relationships, and expectations 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. You'll learn an approach to orienting new employees that gives them key information and experience, and sets clear and reasonable expectations. I'll also show you how to use listening to tell whether or not the employee is getting what's necessary. The chapter closes with a step-by-step guide for implementing this approach with your next new employee.

**Chapter 5. The Gardener's Mind:** Successful gardeners have a certain mind-set: 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 what nature offers. This chapter explains the mind-set of a successful coach, which is very similar to that of a successful gardener—believing in people's potential and wanting to help them grow. I'll use the gardening metaphor to show why this mind-set is critical to growing great employees, and

what can happen if the coach doesn't have that mind-set. You'll learn a way to investigate your own mind-set, and to shift it, if necessary, by managing your self-talk about your employees. Finally, I'll provide a suggestion about how to sustain the "coach" mind-set.

**Chapter 6. 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. This chapter offers a listening- and observation-based approach to discovering how to best manage each of your employees. You'll learn to use this approach to determine an employee's strengths and passions, as well as his or her Achilles' heels. You'll also be able to find out what motivates each employee, and what each employee finds demotivating. At the end of the chapter, you'll find a suggestion for remembering your most important discoveries.

**Chapter 7. Staking and Weeding:** This chapter focuses on key "maintenance" skills for growing employees. These are the managerial equivalents of the things a gardener does to keep a garden thriving—staking, weeding, spraying, deadheading, etc. They may not be the most fun or creative aspects of management (or gardening) but these preventative measures nip problems in the bud and give employees a chance to bloom. You and I will explore the skills of making agreements with your employees and giving them feedback, first explaining why each skill is helpful and how they work together to keep your employees moving in the right direction. Then we'll teach an approach to making agreements that yield realistic expectations to which the employee is committed and that he or she feels capable of fulfilling. I'll build on this to teach you how to give feedback (both positive and corrective) about whether an employee is fulfilling his or her agreements, in a way that your employee will find "hearable" and actionable. You'll get real-life examples of both skills in use, and you'll have a chance to prepare to have a real-life feedback conversation with one of your employees.

**Chapter 8. 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.” This chapter will show how delegation, when done well, increases employee capability, creates commitment and pride, and frees the leader for higher-leverage, more strategic work. I’ll offer a model for delegation that builds on skills learned in previous chapters (especially listening, agreements, feedback, and determining the best management approach for a given employee). I’ll then walk you through how to apply the model, and share a case study of a leader who used it to unleash the growth potential in a key employee.

**Chapter 9. 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! This chapter focuses on how to help your employees focus on developing new skills and abilities, including management and leadership. I’ll share a model for coaching that builds on the delegation discussion of the previous chapter, as well as the “coach mind-set” ideas of chapter 5. You and I also will talk about situations where you, the manager, are the best resource for an employee to acquire new skills or knowledge; I’ll offer an approach to teaching, based on concepts we’ve discussed earlier, and give you a chance to think through how you could teach something important to one of your employees.

**Chapter 10. 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 for his or her growth. This chapter offers a summary of the core responsibilities you can expect any employee to fulfill. I’ll also discuss a “management decision tree” based on the skills in this book, an approach to making sure you’ve taken every reasonable step to balance your efforts as a manager with an employee’s efforts to support his or her own growth. This chapter is less skill-based and more conceptual than most

of the previous ones, exploring the issue of personal responsibility, and helping you think more clearly about how your actions and assumptions can support or hinder an employee's taking charge of his or her professional development.

**Chapter 11. Some Plants Don't Make It:** Even skilled gardeners have some plants that don't thrive, despite their best efforts. It's true of leaders, too; sometimes even excellent managers and leaders have employees who don't succeed. This chapter reviews the "management decision tree" introduced in chapter 10 and discusses how to proceed when you've determined that you've done what you can, and a particular employee is not going to thrive in a given job. This chapter focuses on giving you a process and tools for taking the difficult step of termination in a way that's fair and respectful and that minimizes damage to the rest of the organization.

**Chapter 12. The Master Gardener:** Reading this book is a start. Now it's time to try these ideas and approaches in your real world. Some readers—you, perhaps?—might want to take it even further; growing great employees might be, or might become, something of a passion for you. I'll talk about the idea of mastery—of personally gaining mastery in those areas that are important to you, and how you can continue to use this book as a resource. I'll also help you make a plan for continuing to develop toward mastery as a manager of people. Finally, you'll create a key phrase or phrases you can use to remind yourself why and how you want to grow great employees.

I hope you'll find this book useful, enjoyable, and thought-provoking in equal measure. And if you'd like to tell me how it strikes you, or find out more about my company and what we do, I'd love to hear from you: Feel free to e-mail me at [connect@proteus-international.com](mailto:connect@proteus-international.com).

Bon voyage!

*Erika Andersen  
Kingston, NY  
June 2006*