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A culture of brilliance

Does your organization have what it takes to foster growth?

By **Jo Hawkins Donovan**, for *Small Business Times*

We moved into a condo a couple of years ago. Prior to that, we had a house with a small fenced-in backyard. My husband and I wanted to grow an abundance of colorful flowers in that backyard. (He definitely has the greener thumb, I must say.) We had a vision of a cozy, romantic courtyard with delightful scents and visual appeal all around.

We did a lot to create a culture for growing those vibrant flowers. First of all, we made a tough decision to fell an aging, scraggly honey locust tree that shielded all the sun from the yard. In our flower beds, we did everything we could think of, in the organic vein, to create soil that would nurture the young plants. And we learned that we needed to keep on enriching the soil.

Eventually, we had an environment in which we could grow any flower we wanted that could take our Midwest winters. I planted all my favorite herbs close to the kitchen door. My husband built a fountain out of aged wooden barrel slats. It was a glorious little space where we spent many a leisurely hour with family members and friends.

We love our new condo; it suits our lifestyle perfectly. As far as celebrating summer's luscious flowers, though, we faced a challenge. The grounds around our building are really lovely, and one of our neighbors takes it upon herself to enhance the yard with tasteful plantings of bright annuals and to care for them all summer. Her very generous gift to all of us is appreciated by the unit owners and our neighbors, I'm sure.

Our very own "outdoor" space is a small deck facing north. We get only a few precious rays of sun there late in the day. Last year we just shrugged our shoulders and said, "No flowers, I guess." This year my stubborn nature got fired up. With the help of our local nurseries, I put together a nice array of potted plants that can grow in that shady environment. Much better.

This past year, with another master coach, Sandye Brown from Vancouver, I've been doing quite a bit of training coaches within organizations. The people who hire us to develop coaching skills, usually want to see leadership flourish throughout their systems, like flowers in a sunny, well-tended garden.

They want individual talent to "blossom" and thrive.

Sandye and I love developing coaches. We can't get over the difference coaching makes.

We are well aware, too, though, as Louis Koster, president of Strategic Business Developments said, "Leadership doesn't happen in

isolation." When we begin a process of spreading coaching skills — and the coaching way of being — through an organization, we know that culture drives performance. In many systems, a cultural transformation is part of the deal.

As managers develop coaching skills, and an appreciation for how effective they can be using the coaching model instead of their old command-and-control model, they can help everyone around them envision a healthier and more productive culture. This only works of course, if it is sanctioned by the people at the top.

In *The Coaching Revolution*, authors David Logan and John King describe five cultures in the workplace. They distinguish between cultures that are "vital," "important," "useful," "ineffective" and "undermining."

It might be interesting for you to look at their descriptions. In "vital" cultures, for instance, they found "the sense of mission to improve the quality of life for all people was genuine." Vital cultures also had these things in common: high morale, a strong sense of mission, high team spirit, a focus on making a positive impact on the world and a sense of partnership in accomplishing the mission.

You might want to "test the garden soil" of your own organization to see whether it has the right ingredients for healthy growth. How is morale? Is communication open and clear? Are people divided into "in-groups"? Is there widespread awareness and acceptance of the mission? Do you have a safe and nourishing environment for "growing" a garden of movers and shakers?

Cultural change is going on continually within systems. I guess the challenge is to do everything possible to guide that change toward the kind of environment you want and that is consistent with your vision. It takes time. It takes consistency from the senior management. It takes a whole lot of conversations. It takes speaking your truth. It takes integrity.

If you are willing to make that kind of investment, I can guarantee that the results will be satisfying. Logan and King decided, after much research, "Culture is the single biggest determinant of an organization's success or failure."



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