

Using the Three Plants Metaphor to Explore Workplace Dynamics

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Three Plants Metaphor

Imagine three identical plants with identical pots, soil, and sunlight. Over time, the first plant is watered and fertilized with nutrients. The second is only watered. The third is ignored.

Each plant's ability to grow and to blossom will quickly diverge. Pronounced and obvious differences emerge. The first is full and lush; it has even started to flower. The second plant is less impressive but healthy looking, nonetheless. The third is withered and brown.



Leaders often struggle to explore workplace dynamics without intertwining the personality, ability, and circumstance of individual team members. Is Susie lazy? Is Bob always aggressive? Is Chris completely disengaged? Or are they each reacting to a common challenge in different ways? Discussing workforce dynamics in terms of individual attributes creates a fog of ambiguity, making it difficult to decipher and discuss patterns.

The three plants metaphor provides an understandable way to separate workplace dynamics from individual team member experience. By design, this metaphor suspends the impact of individual factors on employee performance, such as education, ability, attitude, etc. We can isolate workforce dynamics which may otherwise be lost.

Individual values, priorities, goals, and circumstances dictate the workplace dynamics that we each seek. For this reason, the metaphor is reflective rather than prescriptive.

The Plants

Using plants to represent team members allows us to make all else equal and to focus on broader factors that impact performance. Isolating workplace dynamics allows us to

examine the compatibility of conditions with the specific plant in question.

For plants, compatibility could include soil conditions or sunlight. For employees, compatibility includes:

- Values alignments
- Genuine support and expressed appreciation
- The presence and/or tolerance of bias and prejudice
- Work-life integration
- Physical and psychological safety at work

Like different varieties of plants, the needs of team members will vary.

The Water & The Nutrients

Think about your past managers and leaders. Can you quickly divide them into superstar managers, competent managers and draining managers? The respective leader's ability to meet your basic needs (water) and foster your growth (nutrients) likely explains the different experiences.

Performing basic management functions (water) provides staff with the schedules, policies, etc. they need to do their job. Meeting these basic needs may prevent withering but

will not generate the full bloom of a meaningful challenge or professional fulfillment.

When leaders empower and foster growth (nutrients), they nourish individual staff and their collective team. This could include providing team members with opportunities to:

- Learn new skills or take on new responsibilities
- Play an active role in improving the culture, processes and outcomes of the team
- Incorporate their passions into their work
- Innovate and question in a consistently safe place

Failing to nourish team members can leave them feeling stagnant and unsure how they contribute to the team's objectives and the leader's vision for the future. A gardener cultivates a beautiful garden by recognizing and responding to the nuanced needs of the many different plants. Similarly, a leader builds a high-performing team by recognizing, respecting, and responding to the varying needs of their heterogeneous staff.

The Gardener

The gardener represents the full chain of command, recognizing the layered influence of each link in that chain on workplace experience. Collective leadership is the single largest influence on an organization's performance. Senior leaders model behavior and set expectations that cascade through an organizational hierarchy, defining the culture.

Gardeners adapt their approach based on measurement and observation. To be effective, leaders need to do the same thing. Observation of team behavior can detect increased attrition, decreased productivity, etc. However, these are lagging indicators which, like smoke alarms, only raise awareness when there is already a fire in the house.

Measurements derived from surveys, interviews and focus groups can help respond in a more proactive manner.

Objective data gathered using validated tools allows for a variety of valuable analysis. However, the associated effort, time, and expense can prove limiting.

Leaders who prioritize *bi-directional* communication with their team are better prepared to support their staff through change and manage concerns before they fester. Dialogue can be a relatively cheap, fast, and accurate way for leaders to gather data.

Leaders who can create a safe space for regular, candid dialogue will become more effective leaders of more effective teams. To be successful, leaders need to:

- Acknowledge previous missteps
- Utilize humble inquiry rather than be an authority
- Suspend their own reality to explore the team's perceptions
- Broaden their ability to demonstrate empathy, compassion and self-awareness
- Follow through on any commitments to continuously earn the team's trust

Learning to respond to feedback in a non-defensive, curious manner will exponentially increase a leader's effectiveness.

We Are Not Plants

The plant metaphor demonstrates the incredible impact of workplace dynamics. It is not intended to negate the significant impact of individual attributes and decisions on performance. We all navigate opportunities, climb toward our unique goals, and learn from our stumbles. Individual accountability for one's performance is valid but even a prize rose bush will wilt if its needs are not met.

Those who identify with the metaphor's withered plant may begin to experience physical and emotional effects. Some common offenders include:

- Sleep disruption
- Headaches
- Irritability and lack of compassion
- Lack of professional fulfillment

If permitted to persist, these symptoms can further degrade professional performance and invade personal relationships.

Experiencing adverse impacts is a signal that a need is not being met; it is time to reflect on the compatibility of your current workplace dynamics and individual needs.

- How has your work environment changed?
- How have your needs changed and are they being met?
- How is your performance being nourished?
- How could your current workplace dynamics be shaping your life and your trajectory?

We are each responsible for seeking out the environment that will help us thrive. Unlike plants, we can and should improve our workplace conditions whenever possible. There are many options to bridge gaps in our fulfillment outside of work; meaningful volunteer work may scratch that itch. For others, it may be pursuing additional education or a promotion. We can even decide it is time to be transplanted as we search for a place where we can bloom.

