

Gardener Leaders

by Lauro Macías

Last week I attended a L.E.T. workshop taught by Kent Stickler who, as most of you know, is the most successful L.E.T. trainer in the world. Of course it was a great training which led a lot of learnings for me, and that's why I find it funny that one of the most important points came with a very common analogy, but this time it opened up a number of new ideas and a whole new context, in fact, it made something that was just a seemingly simple topic of the Gordon Model one of my favorites: Modifying the Environment, and it's what I want to share with you.

The analogy Kent used was this: as Leaders we are like gardeners: we plant the seeds and then we have to take care of them... simple?, common?, I know, but I would like to give a new perspective this time with 2 main ideas:

1. We can't always be there, but the environment will.

Let's start making an obvious reflection, but one that is worth emphasizing: We as leaders, won't always be with our team members, but the environment they work in will. The gardener sows the seed, but he doesn't sit there until the plant sprouts and he also doesn't set up a tend right next to it to sleep in and spend night and day until it does. He just leaves it in the environment he knows is the best for it, and at appropriate times he visits to water and check on it.

But even when we are "gardeners" when it is about our team members, for some reason we keep trying to sit next to them 100% of the time. It is amazing to me all the effort and time spent by leaders trying to supervise and control their team members at every single moment; they implement systems for checking the entry and leaving time, they give mobile phones even with GPS locator, they restrict the permissions in the office's computers and the internet, they set up video cameras to permanently see the office from anywhere they are. They do all this without realizing it will never be enough, people will always find a way to "elude the system". On the other hand it is impossible to get rid of the environment, our team members will always be in it.

2. We don't have the nutrients, the environment does.

I would like to jump to my second point and link it to the first one: the nutrients come from the environment. If you think about it, the gardener chooses good soil, provides some fertilizer and provides appropriate water, air and sunlight. So, if leaders want to be good gardeners, they have to provide an environment with good nutrients, in the correct amounts.

Since the environment will always be there, and it will constantly feed our team members, we have to guarantee that it has the nutrients they need and the other elements we consider best for them. When we plant in an environment that we know is safe and appropriate, we can stay away from the plant longer, and be sure that it will have good growth, and will be stronger to confront threats on its own. Our responsibility as a leader then, is to provide this environment.

Fixing problems brought by the environment into our relationships

The problem is that we don't take into account the two previous ideas; we don't give the importance we must to the influence of the environment on the development of our team members and on our relationship with them. As a consequence we find many problems in our relationships that are brought by a non-adequate environment: the network is not working properly, so our team member doesn't deliver the information; the reports are lost because our files system is a mess, so we can't present details in our presentation; we have not developed an environment of confidence, so my team members didn't warn me when I was making a mistake, because they were afraid of the consequences, and so on...

I have a personal example I want to share: I grew up in a country which is in the 107th place in an OCDE list of 108 countries about the per capita books read per year, but my situation was different: when I was a child, in all the different houses we lived in we had at least 2 rooms completely filled with by books along every single wall from floor to ceiling there were books. Every time I helped my father move his office, we filled at least 3 huge vans only with books; and everywhere my father took me, he had a book with him. I can't forget him reading in the football stadium when he took me to watch my favorite team... where am I going with this?: My father never had a problem with me when it came to homework that involved reading or when he needed my help reading something and making a summary. Nowadays everywhere I go, I always have at least 1 book with me. My environment was always full of books, I was "fed" with them, now I can't imagine my life without them and all this without my father having ever said anything about it. On the other hand, if our team members are in an environment of negative competition, argues, quarrels, etc., the only thing we are getting from them are lies, discussions and of course a very low performance.

My intention is not to point the finger at leaders who operate differently or to state that this approach to "tending gardens" is an absolute. We all know that plants can grow strong in adverse environments and our coworkers can function and develop in difficult circumstances, but we definitely increase the chances for success and make everything easier with a good environment.

Which is the best environment?

All this bring us to the final question, "which one is the best environment?", and here is where we find our most important role as gardener leaders. We must be aware that there are shadow and sunlight plants; others for dry or wet environments; others will need space to spread, and others will grow as if they were trying to reach the sky.

As leaders many times we want all our team members to perform the best in the same environment, without realizing some of them are better working alone, so they will just join the group in the weekly meetings, while others need company all of the time to develop their ideas; some work better at night than during the morning others need music and others need silence... we all are different so our role as leaders is to identify which

environment is the best for each of our team members, so they can perform at their very best.

Think about it, how many of our problems can be solved more easily in a better environment, which things can be communicated or completed more effectively in a positive atmosphere instead of employing constant oversight, orders and threats and having to deal with the resulting resistance and conflict? What can be done better with a different environment? What can providing a different environment accomplish? It's simple: with the appropriate environment our relationships will be stronger, and if committed fully to providing it, the possibilities become infinite.