

Managing the Garden

By Douglas Crawford, PhD

As a leader, you undoubtedly have witnessed a member of your team display aberrant behavior. For example, let's consider Sarah. She is a hard worker, gets along with others, and is an overall strong performer. Lately, your department has had tight deadlines on a critical project and she has been the point person on a long list of deliverables. Suddenly, you have a stream of people showing up in your office complaining about how Sarah is behaving. You are puzzled because it doesn't sound like the Sarah you know. What is going on?

Every individual has a life that is represented as a garden. In my garden, I am growing beautiful flowers and abundant plants and vegetables. These plants represent everything that is good about me. Following this analogy, when a garden is under stress, latent weeds start to pop up. Eventually, the weeds may even take over the garden and choke out the favorable plants. Ever notice how weeds can just appear overnight? These weeds represent the bad behaviors that individuals may exhibit in times of stress. The growth of these weeds may eventually impact our effectiveness on the job, hurt relationships, and destroy any goodwill that has been earned over time. Even St. Paul stated that he knew the right thing to do, but lamented that there were times when he acted counter to what he felt in his heart and knew in his head to be right. Yes, the weeds are often a surprise to all of us. After all, our gardens are usually so beautiful and abundant.

As a leader, you are called to tend to the garden. The garden represents your life and your ability to create the right growing conditions for the gardens-- the people on your team. A leader, like a gardener, must be aware of the weeds or type of behaviors that may crop up in the garden. How do you react under stress? Do you get angry, impatient, or become withdrawn? Under what circumstances do you feel the weeds popping up? What are the signs? As the leader, how are you managing your life or tending to your garden to assure the weeds aren't growing? A productive garden is tended daily. Are you dedicating time to nurture your whole being – body, mind, and spirit? It is difficult to lead others when your garden is full of weeds.

How do you create the right conditions for other gardens to grow? Leaders need to be cognizant of an ever-changing work environment and the people performing on the team. One way you can control stress in the workplace is through the way work is assigned. Are you aware of what your people are working on? How are you providing support? Do the members of your team have the skills and resources to do the job right? Sometimes leaders are attracted to the worker with the most bountiful garden. This is the person you can always count on to get the job done. This often leads to overloading him or her with work. This person rarely complains so it is easy to keep adding more and more assignments, which then depletes the soil of nutrients over time.

Are the work goals clear to everyone? Unclear goals and expectations only add to the stress. Are you a visible leader? Great leaders are accessible and approachable. Can people under your direction share concerns and express feelings about the work assignments? If you are present as a leader, you will be able to recognize signs of weeds growing in your department and take action. Do you encourage people to balance work and other life obligations? Do you make accommodations in your team for family and personal time off? Do you offer encouragement and support during those unavoidable crunch times? Do you take time to host celebrations for

team and individual accomplishments? Do you consciously strive to make the work environment enjoyable?

If you answered YES to most of these questions, it doesn't guarantee a weed-free garden. We all know that life does happen and there will always be times of stress. However, as a leader, you can be more effective by tending to your garden and creating the proper growing conditions to minimize the stress that is placed upon your team.