

Sheri Fella: Growing leadership like we grow a garden

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SHERI FELLA
IN THE WORKPLACE

Spring is here, and it is time for gardens, which means it is time for new ground-making.

Ground-making is the first step in the process of growth. It is the preparation required to intentionally cultivate the ground so seeds can take hold and begin to grow roots deep and strong enough to sustain growth throughout each growing season.

Humans are above ground, but we still have roots—vision, values, purpose. These roots create the base that allows us to grow and to bloom, and they exist in many forms—in an individual leader, as part of a team and in organizations or systems. While these roots also require intentional cultivation, the most important work is often from the inside out.

In the human experience, growth cannot be sustained without doing your own internal work as an individual—without gaining the clarity that builds a strong root structure. Like ground-making in gardening, ground-making for humans is messy. We have to uncover old root systems that no longer serve us and pull them out. We have to get rid of the weeds that might distract us. We have to go inside ourselves long enough to get clear about what we need to grow. Do we need more water or less water? More light or less light? A stake in the ground to allow for support and upward growth, or space to spread out and explore on level ground? Maybe we need a new seed altogether?

Ground-making takes courage, vulnerability and commitment. It is hard work in messy spaces. I was reminded of just how messy during my 2-1/2-day experience with Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston and bestselling author.

Having the courage to go inside myself and the vulnerability to share what I found with others was a profound reminder of how hard it is to grow, to build new roots. Leaders who are daring enough to enter the hard spaces have cultivated a deep practice—a deep leadership practice of ground-making and learning.

Because that is all we are doing isn't it? Practicing. And practicing. And practicing some more to get better and better at leading ourselves and others wherever we show up.

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Commitment to a lifelong practice of ground-making is a way to sustain growth through all of our seasons. To continue growing we must keep making new ground. Each year, we have to replant the garden. Rework the soil. Put new seeds in the ground. It doesn't just come back year after year because we planted it once.

As humans, we aren't much different. We require constant cultivation, constant practice. Doing something once doesn't often root it in us. We have to keep doing it. Keep weeding. Keep practicing.

I used to work in the garden with my grandpa. He loved the garden because it had such tangible outcomes like the harvest that created many family memories over home-cooked meals. You could see and feel how much practice he put into his garden by looking at and touching his hands. Those rough callouses were the result of his many days of practice in the garden.

There are no callouses to see or feel as a result of our leadership practice, but there are tangible outcomes. Outcomes measured in the ease you have throughout your day or in the consistency in which you show up. Outcomes that show retention of your team and the engagement expressed by your loved ones. Outcomes that build self-awareness roots so deep, you cannot be uprooted when others try to violate your values, shift your purpose or thwart your vision. Others cannot see those things, but you can certainly feel them and how deeply rooted they are inside of you.

What growing season are you in? What weeds do you need to pull from your leadership practice? What new seeds need to be planted for your growth? These are important questions that don't often have easy answers. But maybe, if you have the courage to get messy and break new ground, a new seed will take root. •

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