

## Cultivating a Healthy Organization

by Judith Anderson

*Judith Anderson is the author of [The Path to Corporate Nirvana: An Enlightened Approach to Accelerating Productivity](#) (Silver Falls Press March 2003). Anderson has 25 years of business experience in strategic planning, quantitative analysis, and marketing. She is the founder of consulting firm Anderson & Rust and LeadershipU, an executive training organization. Additional information can be found at [www.CorporateNirvana.com](http://www.CorporateNirvana.com).*

In my leisure time, I am a gardener. The things I learn from gardening influence and inspire my outlook on life and business. For example, nurturing a healthy business organization is similar to cultivating a garden. Both require attention, care and, among other things, weeding. If left unattended, an organization can become overtaken by workplace behaviors that, like weeds, strangle creativity, passion, enthusiasm, productivity and innovation. These unproductive behaviors include withholding support, withholding information, attacking diverse views, talking over others, intimidation, and lashing out. For a flower to reach its full potential it must have space to grow and access to what nurtures it. Weeds can slow that process down and so to support my garden I need to eliminate weeds. Similarly in the workplace, when I look for ways to eliminate unproductive behaviors, I encourage the potential for growth.

I have found that in this elimination process, it can be easy to think of weeds as “bad.” There can be a demand that the weed go and not come back — a thinking that the weed means something is wrong. Weeds are not bad per se; they are simply plants growing where they are not needed. Similarly, in my experience it is helpful to see unproductive behaviors not as “bad,” but as behaviors that simply lower the efficiency with which aggressive goals are reached. In this cultivation process, it is important to recognize that a habit, belief, behavior or relationship dynamic is no longer serving me, and then I can choose to weed it out. There is, however, no need to judge the habit, belief or relationship as wrong or bad. That will only increase aggravation. Unproductive behaviors, rather, should be seen as opportunities for learning.

Recently, I had the opportunity to address an audience of diversity professionals at a conference in New Jersey. We were defining productivity and asking how an organization can use diversity to meet strategic business goals. I was completely surprised by the response I received from a large segment of the audience when I defined productivity as “the grace and ease with which aggressive goals are met.” There was an explosion of negative emotion from the group. They were fighting with me on this point.

I must admit, my first reaction was one of defensiveness. But then I got curious and asked, “Can you tell me what it is about that phrase that is so troubling?” The answer was a surprise. “You have to understand, half the people in this room are black, and when you say ‘grace and ease’ it is like you are asking us to lie down and be slaves again.” Now that was interesting! The diversity professionals were not rejecting the idea I was presenting but my choice of words and their connotations. I shared a little about what it was like to have a “diverse” view (like

the one I had just offered) rejected so adamantly, and I wondered out loud if misunderstanding might be at the source of the resistance they were receiving from their organizations. Overall, the exchange was productive because it led to understanding and gave me the ability to better help my audience meet their needs.

Unfortunately, not all encounters with resistance lead to understanding. A client of mine, who is a senior person in a \$40-billion organization, recently told me of how he had withdrawn from articulating an important issue to his boss because the boss had initially dismissed it as irrelevant. In speaking with my client, I had asked: "How big of an increase in your department's productivity would have occurred if you had gotten your boss to see your point?" And he had answered, "Easily forty percent." This was a situation in which my client's negative emotions held him back from articulating how to increase productivity and growth for his employer. While the boss's dismissal of his ideas was certainly unproductive, my client's unwillingness (up to that point) to learn from this resistance and better understand his manager's reservations compounded the problem.

This challenge is common in business. Delivering feedback to an authority figure can bring forward fear and hesitancy. There are several ways to handle this type of situation:

1. Remind yourself that: We are all peers, just with different jobs. I want to approach my boss or authority figure as a peer who doesn't have information that I have.
2. Deliver the feedback "for the goal", as in the statement, "For us to reach our cost and revenue objectives, it would be helpful if we ...."
3. Adopt the attitude that "I don't have to know how to get my boss to see my point; I am learning to get my boss to see my point." This creates space to learn and eases the pressure to do it right.
4. Identify possible negative outcomes and have a strategy for handling them (if they occur) but remind yourself that that strategy is just precautionary.
5. Focus on the best possible outcome, and hold this image (not the negative future fantasy) in mind.

Encounters with resistance are like encountering weeds in a garden. It is tempting to go on the attack or give up on the situation altogether. In reality, the weeds guide us toward what we want. By learning what is not helpful or desirable, we better understand what we would like to create. If we look at unproductive behaviors in this way, they can be used creatively to cultivate healthy learning organizations.