

# GROWERTALKS

## Growers Talk Business

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### Searching for Daniel-san

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"I think a job description would really help," he said. "Because I just want to be faithful to what you want."

I grinned and nodded slightly, but if you knew me you'd recognize my grin was more of a grimace. "Here's your job description," I said. "Wax on. Wax off."

He smiled, but even if you didn't know him you'd see his smile was more anxious than amused. There was an awkward moment of silence. "No, I'm serious," he said.

"So am I." Sometimes being a boss means feeling like a jerk. What can you say to someone who runs his business by the guiding light of "The Karate Kid"? How do you deal with a boss who has a Mr. Miyagi complex?

Josh had been with us for a couple months. I'd hired him to be an irrigation ... what, technician? Manager? Worker? I don't even know what to call his position. I don't do titles any more than I do job descriptions or mission statements.

But, honestly, I thought Josh's goal was already pretty clear: *The current irrigation guy plans to retire in two years, so learn everything he knows and be able to do everything he can do. Or in other words: I want you to become a black-belt in irrigation.*

How do you become a black belt? If you're the Karate Kid, you don't start with crane kicks and chopping bricks. You start with waxing on and off. And if you're the Irrigation Kid, you don't start with Bernoulli's principle or by typing up a detailed job description. You start by digging a ditch.

Unfortunately, Josh didn't get it. We parted ways. And I'm still looking for my Irrigation Kid.

My wife tells me to get used to it. I'm going to keep having the same sort of problems with anyone under the age of 30. She says, "It's a sort of hazing ritual ya'll have with new employees. You force them to connect dots on their own and don't do too much hand-holding. You want to see them struggle with small things, see how they react. And then the other employees laugh at them when they mess up. The Millennial generation won't put up with that; even the mildest hazing is considered abuse."

Maybe she's right. When I was young, about the only instruction I received at the farm that resembled a job description was, "All we want to see is asses and elbows." My wife tells me, "The culture of your farm used hostility and verbal abuse because everyone thought that's what was necessary to turn boys into men."

I tell her it really wasn't that bad and today it's nowhere near like it was then. "That's what everyone who successfully endured hazing says," she replied.

Yes, my wife and I have had this conversation many times and will likely have it again because I'm not looking for babies to coddle. We're not that kind of nursery.

Is it unreasonable to tell an employee their job description is "wax on, wax off"? Yeah, probably. But I want people on my team who want to do the work, not talk about the work. Who are more concerned with busting their tails than covering their tails. Who grasp that faithfulness is proven in the small things, like waxing on and off, and not in skipping ahead to the showy crane-kick. I need resilient and resourceful people who can solve problems and deal with failure. I need people who can navigate ambiguity and endure discomfort ... people who can follow principles, not policies. How can you empower people who are happy to just get a participation medal?

Being a boss means feeling like a jerk sometimes, and honestly, I don't think I'll do much different with the next "Josh" who comes along. There are two mistakes we make in hiring: "picking the wrong people" and "not picking the right people." Someday, perhaps I'll figure out a way to reliably identify the "wrong people" in their interviews, but until then I'll just keep on making the same mistakes. And it will work out so long as I remain faithful to "wax off" after I "wax on." **GT**

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