

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Get Your Hopes Up

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Only a handful of my employees know his real name is David. Everyone just calls him "Chief." That's not the sort of nickname you give yourself. You have to earn it. Chief exudes authority. Even if he weren't your boss, you'd listen to him. He's a true leader.

But even if you can't help but take him seriously, he still acts like a little kid on Christmas morning when he gets excited about something. This Chief has passion!

We were outside the office, kicking gravel, catching up. "How's the new kid working out?" I asked.

Chief beamed. "Boy, I've got a great feeling about this one! The best we've found in years!"

Sometimes, it seems like time slows down for me, like in one of those "Matrix" movies. I don't dodge bullets or shrapnel, but bad ideas. And in that instant, talking with Chief, a lot went through my mind. I was just about to say, "Don't get your hopes up."

We have a lot of experience, Chief and I, with farmworkers. For decades, I've done all the recruiting, interviewing and hiring. And once I finish the paperwork, I turn our new employees over to Chief.

He doesn't just put people to work, he goes to work on them. At heart, he's a coach. He trains and instructs; he observes and divines. He tests them, puts them in different positions and sees how they do. He perceives hidden talents and weaknesses others overlook.

And he keeps getting his heart broken.

People are flaky. How many times have I hired a big, brawny guy who can't make it a day in the field? How many times have wimpy-looking kids surprised us by running circles around the body-builders? Some folks who could barely fill out their own name and address on the I-9 form turn out to be geniuses when it comes to pruning. If you think you're a good judge of character, try hiring people someday. That will cure you of your illusion real quick.

"I really need this job," they'll tell you and then fail to show up. "I love the idea of working outside," they say and then when it rains or the thermometer is over 100 they can't be found. "I just love plants," they coo and then complain that their back hurts from all the bending over. "I'm so glad I finally found a job that has steady hours," they exclaim and

then they show up late three days out of five. "It's so peaceful to work on a farm," they tell you and the next thing you know they cry because they can't handle the stress.

People say a lot of things and then do something else.

Hiring people, especially for entry-level farmwork, is a lot like panning for gold. Have you ever done that? I did once when I was a kid. It's a lot of standing and stooping and staring at tiny pebbles until your eyes cross, and rather short on the "finding gold" part. Chief and I both know that hiring is a numbers game. You have to work through a lot of duds to find a few who are truly great.

The same is true for customers and clients. Not all prospects are golden. Whether you're paying them or they're paying you, people are full of surprises. Beware the whale and the minnow alike. Some are sharks. Many a customer will get your hopes up, only to elude you in the end.

But you can't stop panning and hope is a rather important ingredient when it comes to panning.

The worst thing about experience is it makes you cynical. It leads you to say things like, "Don't get your hopes up." And it seems like the right thing to say because you've seen it all before and only time will tell.

I looked at Chief. I smiled. I said, "That's great to hear! Keep up the good work."

You have a choice. You can have a company that warns each other not to get their hopes up or you can choose to foolishly believe you might just find gold every single time you fill your pan with pebbles. **GT**

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