GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Selecting the Best of the Bunch

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Just imagine you go to the grocery store with a taste for a juicy, crunchy red apple. Faced with piles of apples, you check them out with the goal to select the “best in the bunch.” You pick up a few, turn them over in your hand, observe and assess. Are they too green? Do they have dents that indicate a flaw? Are they ready for consumption?
You pass on the apples that are “beyond their prime.” At one time they may have been ready, but now they aren’t the right choice. As you dig through the bunch, you may find a mushy apple at the bottom that’s “rotten to the core.” How could the grocery store allow one to spoil the bunch?

You’ve completed the in-store examination and make an informed selection. You anticipate the first bite, the moment when you hear the crunch and the juice runs down your chin. Sometimes your choice is perfect; sometimes the beautiful apple is hard, sour, not ready for consumption and your only choice is to “spit it out.”

You may be thinking, “Is picking the right apple luck or chance?” No, you’ve learned from prior choices. When you question your selection, you ask for help from the produce employee—a person with wisdom.

If you go in the store hungry, you may grab an apple and be surprised when you take that first bite. When you take time to identify what you want, observe and inspect, you’re more assured of making the right decision.

Just imagine the grocery store is your company and the apples are your employees. You have several people to choose from, but who and how do you choose? Succession planning is a business strategy for passing leadership roles to one or more employees. This helps ensure the business runs smoothly and continues to flourish in the future.

In my experience, very few companies talk about succession planning—whether it’s a family business or not. This topic is critical! No one should be irreplaceable.

When considering who moves up in the organization, you may have multiple candidates or only one choice. Perhaps the person you’re considering is a family member or an outside hire to bring in a desired level of talent. How do you know if or when they’re ready to progress? Do you select the employee who’s “ripe for the role” or the person who’s very green and needs time to develop?

An integral component of succession planning is the job description that includes an outline of expectations, responsibilities, requirements and desired results. The job description provides the compass for a job. Every business should have clear job descriptions for every position, otherwise, when it comes to hiring, interviewing, assessing, reviewing and coaching, it’s a moving target.

Even a task such as planting an apple orchard starts with a detailed blueprint. You first identify whether apples can successfully grow in the soil, you buy seeds, prepare the ground, dig, plant, water and eventually enjoy the fruits of your labor. This outline helps ensure your desired results, to savor “ripe fruit.”

Some of the most successful leadership transitions are the result of intentional job rotations. An employee is placed in a role, given clear expectations, desired outcomes and coached on their performance. The employee is treated similarly to others and this enhances their credibility. Yes, everyone knows they’re the chosen successor, but now they’ve shared similar experiences with the team. The “shiny apple” is now one of the bunch, recognized for their performance and results. The team now sees their work ethic and will support them during their business education.

Once the successor masters a role, they’re moved to another position or given a task to accomplish. Perhaps your company is preparing for a technology transition and you need a project manager. This may be a perfect opportunity for the successor to highlight their skills. It provides additional data to evaluate their leadership, project management, financial oversight and results orientation. The successor benefits by fostering relationships and building believability in real life situations.

What if the successor makes mistakes? This is going to happen! Then you provide feedback as a mid-course correction. Accept that the successor may do things differently than you would. The “apple may fall far from the tree.”

What if you have multiple people interested in advancing in the organization? Consider the people who are interested in moving up and give them an opportunity to participate, learn, grow and impact the business. Companies typically set goals, and identify projects and desired outcomes for the future. Give potential successors specific tasks or projects, and outline performance metrics while providing specific feedback along the way.

But what do you do if the successor or “wannabe” leader assumes they’re “ripe for the picking” when in fact they’re “green” or their “bruises” are starting to surface?

That is why it’s critical to place the potential successor in jobs with detailed duties and clear expectations. You may determine they have certain skills, but don’t possess others. This indicates future training needs to be communicated clearly and quickly.

If you determine that the successor or “wannabe” leader doesn’t possess the skills or abilities to do the next job, have an honest and compassionate conversation. Consider would they be more successful in another role? This interaction isn’t easy—no one wants to hear that they’re not ready or not the right choice. As difficult as this is, it must be done for the sake of the employee and the
company.

As a business leader, you then need to pivot and identify potential alternatives for the future. Consider your strategy, transition, organization and hiring plan.

Remember: to select the right apple, you need to plant seeds for success, foster potential, identify talent, train, coach and go out on a limb! **GT**

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