

GROWERTALKS

Paul's Pointers

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Keeping an Open Mind

Paul Pilon



At first, I imagined telling you how important it is to keep an open mind when it comes to managing employees and navigating through the day-to-day challenges we face in our jobs. However, as I was contemplating how to begin this article I thought I'd approach it a little differently, and make it more personal.

Pictured: Meeting the students for the first time at the airport is one of the best memories we have with the exchange students. When she got off the plane, we were holding this sign and wearing "Avengers" masks. It's never too early to embarrass them in public. The Pilon's left to right: me, my wife Jennifer, daughter Kaylan, exchange student Sofia and daughter Carissa.

I generally consider myself a professional in the green industry and have been blessed over the years to share a little of my knowledge with you in trade articles such as this one, presentations and through the Perennial Pulse e-newsletter. Even with these platforms, I'm not that different from you—as far as I know, I'm human much like you. That being said, I thought I'd share a little of what I've learned about family and how keeping an open mind has changed our lives over the past several years.

Our family keeps getting bigger

We were always interested in hosting an exchange student, but like many things in life, never pursued it until one day the opportunity landed in our laps. We were at a parent meeting for my daughter's dance team. Turns out a girl was accepted into our school and made the dance team via video tryouts, but didn't have a host family. When we heard this, my wife and I immediately looked at each other and nodded.

Something we were interested in doing in the past but never acted on appeared right in front of us. As good of a time as any for an opportunity like this to arrive, the decision to open our home and volunteer to host a student for 10 months was quite the commitment. Believe me, as much as we wanted to say yes and move forward, we definitely gave it lots of thought and had many family discussions, weighing out the pros and cons of hosting an exchange student.

Several years ago, we hosted our first exchange student, Martina, from Spain. Our first experience hosting a student

was nearly perfect. It went so well we decided to host our second student, Gabi, from Brazil, the following year. Admittedly, the second experience wasn't as smooth as the first one and it was also cut short due to the pandemic. Regardless, the second time hosting was very meaningful and strong family connections were made.

A couple of weeks ago, we opened our home to another exchange student. Sofia from Mexico is the third student we've hosted over the past five years (we took a couple years off when COVID-19 put the world on pause). It's going very well so far and we're excited to have her join our family during her journey here in the States.

Volunteering to host these students has been very enjoyable and rewarding. We get to learn so much about them, how they live, their cultures, their governments and how they view Americans, as well as share our American ways with them. While hosting them for 10 to 11 months, they really become part of our family.

The relationships with them and their families have lasted well beyond the school year and these students will likely be in our lives forever. Someone, if not more than one of us, communicates with each of them at least every week, if not daily.

This year, we were blessed to have our previous two students, Gabi and Martina, visit and stay with us at different times this past summer (Gabi for two-and-a-half weeks, and Martina for an entire month). This speaks volumes to how our family has touched their lives, and how real and strong the family connections really become. It also gave reassurance to Sofia and her family that she was in good hands when she was going to be joining our family for the upcoming school year.

None of these life-altering experiences would've been possible if it weren't for a chance meeting with an exchange student representative at our daughter's dance team's parent meeting. In the moment, it would've been easier to say "no, thank you" and move on with our familiar daily lives. Instead, my wife and I kept our minds open as we considered this potential opportunity.

Keeping our minds open that day and deciding to volunteer to host a student for an entire school year has been a tremendous blessing for our entire family—not once, not twice, but now three times.

Being open-minded at work

Similar to how I try to keep an open mind in my personal life, I also strive to keep an open mind in the workplace. This has served me well over the years. I've benefited from being open-minded when brainstorming ideas, navigating cultural challenges, managing employees, making tough decisions and when receiving criticism from others to name a few.

My suggestion to you for both your professional and personal life is to keep an open mind when hearing new ideas, evaluating problems or when entering unfamiliar territory. Taking the most comfortable or familiar path may be easy, but may not result in the best outcome. Doing the same things you've always done will lead to the same outcomes. Keeping an open mind and trying new things or doing things differently may help you achieve different results and allow you to move things forward.

Please feel free to contact me if you'd like to discuss our experiences hosting exchange students. I'd be happy to answer any questions and point you in the right direction if you think hosting a student is right for you and your family.

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Paul Pilon is editor-at-large of the Perennial Pulse e-newsletter and Director of Growing at Opel Growers in Hudsonville, Michigan. He can be reached at paul@opelgrowers.com.