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Growth means more when it's a team

When you think about growing, what comes to mind? Root structure and branching? Fertility and weed management?



Ben Verhoeven

Perhaps it is personal growth. Greenhouse structures and irrigation design? Or business and community?

For me it is cultural growth — how a group solves problems together, makes small, meaningful improvements, how they interact with the outside world, and how they take care of each other.

Culture is something we spend a lot of effort on at Peoria Gardens, our family farm in Albany, Oregon. An introduction to a defined culture was a pivotal moment on my journey as a second-generation business owner. That journey has not been linear. It was a boomerang.

I attended college at the Rhode Island School of Design, studying how to both give and receive constructive criticism (something my wife Kathryn is quick to point out that I am still learning).

After graduation, I spent a year in Rome, Italy. Then I lived in rural Wisconsin (writing a book about trees); Atlanta, Georgia; and two years as a bike commuter in Portland.

Throughout, I was always grateful for the life I had growing up on our family farm. When my mother became very ill, it was important to be close to her in her last year. Kathryn and I moved back to the valley. This was my chance to give the nursery an honest try.

Fourteen years and three children later, we both appreciate how fortunate we are to work with such a wonderful team of people, to be close to family and able to raise our kids outdoors.

When I purchased the nursery from my father, a successful grower and entrepreneur, I had big shoes to fill. To prove myself, I managed to micromanage my way into more problems than solutions. A mentor barked, “Ben, you are violating the rule of the span of control!”

My way out has been learning about Lean manufacturing and working hard to apply its tools at our farm. Central to Lean is respect for people. Combining the quality and efficiency tools of Lean with a defined culture has been powerful for me and our team.

At a nursery, especially during the spring, we spend a lot of time with each other. Anything we can do to build mutual trust, teamwork, accountability, communication and respect goes a long way.

The OAN and your participation in it is no different. You think deeply about the work you do and the people you work with. You have told me how you consider your coworkers and colleagues, even your competitors, to be friends and family. You didn't get to this place without trust, communication and respect.

As I look forward to the next year as your president, I would like to thank Amanda Staehely for her service. She was and continues to be a clear communicator and has certainly earned all our trust and respect.

I am also thankful for the fellow nursery folks who have encouraged me to participate, especially those on the other side of the political aisle. I treasure those friendships. They continue to show me that we can differ in opinion, even be direct competitors, but together share a common goal to not just sell beautiful plants, but to help people grow healthier and cleaner cities, communities, homes and gardens. ☺