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## **Management Lessons Learned from an Organic Vegetable Garden**

*by Kate Hanson*

Over the past 30 years, I have pursued two passions: growing vegetables and herbs in my organic garden and studying the complexities of working with others. With the former, I try to plant enough vegetables to feed my family for much of the year. With the latter, I have worked with hundreds of people within all kinds of organizations to improve how they supervise and manage their work and the work of others, including both volunteers and paid employees. Until the other day, I viewed these passions as two different areas of my life. Now I'm not so sure. As I knelt to thin carrots and weed among the onions, I started to wonder whether the lessons I've learned from my gardening could also be applied to how we supervise the work of others. Could the basic principles of an organic approach to gardening also serve us as approaches for organizing and supervising volunteers? I started to identify some of the key ideas that guide my work with plants and consider them in relation to my work with others. Here are some of the parallels I found:

### **Organic Gardening Principle #1:**

**Healthy plants come from healthy soil – and healthy soil comes from an ongoing process of enrichment and relaxation.**

My neighbors started their first garden this year. Although we planted at the same time, my tomatoes and squashes are three times the size of theirs. Why? Because my husband and I have diligently added compost and other organic matter to the soil whenever we can in order to replenish it and return nutrients to it. We're also careful to balance planting of high-need and soil-building plants over the course of a season or years.

### **Supervisory Corollary:**

Our homes, schools and workplaces are the soil of our relationships. If they have been created with care, provided enriching support and careful attention, they will offer us a safe and nurturing place to develop ourselves and others. Without this careful attention, they can easily become barren, inhospitable environments for growth of any kind. Taking time to attend to the structures of our living places can only enhance the experiences of all within them. As supervisors of volunteers, this means: making sure that policies and procedures are respectful and clear; offering comprehensive orientation and training opportunities; and ensuring that people know what their jobs are and that they can do them safely.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #2:**

**Diversity matters.**

My garden, which is about 20' by 20', has more than 30 different crops and varieties flourishing every summer, from cucumbers to kohlrabi to strawberries. This wide range of plants both enriches our diets and protects us from single-handed destruction by one insect group. The visual exuberance of so many organisms working side-by-side is exhilarating.

**Supervisory Corollary:** Diversity not only promotes healthy crops, it encourages us as individuals to expand our understanding and appreciation of the unique gifts we all bring to our worlds. It also invites us to try new things and to question how we view the work that needs to get done and who can do it. More practically, it demands of us a willingness to review what we do and who we include, to challenge our recruitment procedures and to consider how we welcome differences in our organization, whether those differences be of opinion or ethnicity or age.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #3: Rotate Crops**

With the exception of the perennial herb garden which stands guard for us outside our fence, we try never to plant the same crop in the same exact space from one year to the next. This crop rotation process allows us to find better growing conditions for our crops as it protects them from hibernating insects and soil that's depleted of the nutrients they need.

#### **Supervisory Corollary:**

I believe that we also benefit from rotation in our relationships, although I don't think we need to move or constantly change our volunteers to do this. For us, the rotation can be as simple as looking at an issue from a different perspective, changing where we sit, walk or drive to see new parts of our immediate world, or really listening to the words of someone with whom we often disagree. The benefits are the same for plants and people – a chance to flourish from new vantage points and a protection from the problems associated with tedium, isolation and single-mindedness. As supervisors, I think it can also be very advantageous for people to try new jobs and tasks or, at least, to spend time with others doing different work for the organization. This rotating perspective can help resolve many issues of territoriality that often plague workplaces.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #4: Look for synergy through companion planting.**

The idea of companion planting, finding plants that help or hinder the growth of others, is a time-tested organic approach to insect control and plant production. Beans planted near summer savory, for example, will grow better and have less problems with beetles than if planted alone. I always plant radishes near my cucumbers to discourage the striped cucumber beetle, and plant marigolds throughout the garden to bring color and reduce the nematodes. I love the idea of these organic partnerships and the "let's work together" attitude they represent. I also avoid placing some plants next to others because I know they don't get along very well. Basil, for example, doesn't do well grown next to sage and cabbage does not enjoy being planted near tomatoes. To get the most from my garden, I need to appreciate the chemistry that comes from plants interactions with each other.

#### **Supervisory Corollary:**

As a parent, teacher and supervisor, I know how powerful "companion planting" can be in human relationships as well. Paying attention to how people work together and bringing people together carefully can result in stunning synergy. Thoughtless organizing can often bring very different results – as any of us who tried to get our children away from a "great as individuals, horrible as a group" situation well knows. Like companion planting, this kind of

matching takes some experimenting, a willingness to try new combinations, and a commitment to reflecting on what has happened. It also demands, I think, that we honor a principle that one of my first mentors taught me: “Work with people where they are, not where you think they should be.” Too often we force people into situations because we believe they should be ready for them or should get along with this group rather than appreciating where each person is at a particular time and working with him or her from that vantage point. It also encourages us to try to fit the job, at least as much as possible, to the unique qualifications of the volunteer rather than insisting that everyone be the same.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #5: Pay attention.**

In order to avoid the need for significant insecticide intervention, I know that I need to spot problems early. The sooner I see the aphids or slugs, the quicker I can respond and take control of the problem. If I want to avoid spraying strong chemicals, I need to truly attend to my plants, looking carefully at them every day, appreciating their growth, and looking for possible problem areas. This also allows me to respond to issues before they multiply, and encourages me to appreciate the wonder and uniqueness of these plants on a daily basis.

#### ***Supervisory Corollary:***

This attention is so much more important for the people in our lives! Really seeing each person and noticing how she/he is doing, listening for what is said or implied, appreciating each person’s uniqueness and beauty, watching for signs of distress – these can all mean the difference between a healthy, well-functioning workplace and constant crisis control. Over the past few decades, I have worked with hundreds of people in professional development trainings and classes. Regardless of their job title, whether they’re paid or not, or where they work, the most common concern I hear is that people do not feel appreciated for what they do. Again and again, the people with whom I work talk about their need to be recognized and for their efforts to be noticed.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #6: Clean up.**

This appears to be one of the truisms of organic gardening – to protect next year’s crops, you have to clean up after this year’s. A messy garden left to overwinter becomes an ideal breeding ground for all kinds of unwelcome guests the next summer. Therefore, it’s vital to take time at the end of a season to close up the garden and to get rid of whatever debris remains.

#### ***Supervisory Corollary:***

I think this is equally important in our supervisory relationships with each other, although I see this more as internal cleaning up than external. Relationships may be able to thrive in a messy workplace. However, they can’t survive if we are unwilling to challenge the “debris” we carry in our minds – the old grudges, the resentments, the preconceived ideas. In order to prevent last year’s issues from destroying the potential of our tomorrows, we need to commit ourselves to a mental clearing out on a regular basis. This is especially true for our work as supervisors.

### **Organic Gardening Principle #7: Adapt to changing circumstances.**

I gardened in one place for 25 years. A few years ago I moved and discovered that many of the plants that flourished at my old home, just five miles away, were miserable in their new place. Others that would not grow in my former garden did splendidly. I also notice that

conditions change in my yard from year to year: trees grow and create more shade, a rainy spring makes some areas too wet for planting, an infestation of a specific insect damages some plants or a plant gets too big for its original spot and needs to be moved. I realize that I can't control everything that is happening to my garden or within it. Each year, I adapt. I re-plant, move things around, try something new.

***Supervisory Corollary:***

Isn't this a crucial approach to our supervisory relationships as well? No matter what things are like now with our work or volunteer colleagues, they will change. Neither we nor the people in our lives stay the same for very long. We learn, we age, we wonder, we wander... and appreciating this as the reality of life allows us to adapt, learn and move on. As supervisors, it means we must be committed to seeing what's happening around us and how it is changing – and then determine how best to respond to this new reality.

**Organic Gardening Principle #8:  
If at first you don't succeed, try again.**

Organic gardening, like life, is a great experiment. No matter how experienced we are, each year demands a leap of trust that all of the work we'll put into this endeavor will result in healthy vegetables, fruits and herbs. There are no guarantees that this will be so and, often, there are failures. The bean seeds rot, the carrots get eaten by woodchucks, the tomato hornworms devastate the crop, an early frost does in the peppers. And yet, despite these constant setbacks, I look forward every year to my gardening time. I have learned to accept the inevitable problems and to focus on the bounty that remains.

***Supervisory Corollary:***

I am trying to do the same with my relationships – to respond to problems as necessary but to spend most of my time seeing what is working and to appreciate the wonder of us all. Take a moment to look around you...aren't we all amazing?

**Lesson Overview**

As I look back on what I've written and the connections I've made between my gardening and working worlds, I'm realizing that certain principles may guide fruitful, sustainable relationships with all living beings, whether they're plants, children or volunteers. Some of the lessons I take from this reflection include:

- *Beginnings matter.* Whether it's good soil, a welcoming smile or an effective orientation program, a good start supplies the foundation of later experiences.
- *Structure shapes results.* Garden designs and organizational policies both organize and anticipate certain results. We need to choose these carefully.
- *Our attention is vital.* Plants and people thrive when noticed and valued. No matter how stretched our resources, we can make time to appreciate and listen.

More than anything, I think this exercise has taught me that I still have a lot of work to do both in my garden and in my relationships – and, with the right attitude, this work can be an exciting journey of discovery and possibility. Enjoy!

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## About the Author

**Kate Hanson** is an associate professor at the University of New Hampshire. She is also the co-founder and program chairperson of the unique, award-winning associate degree program in Community Leadership (CoLead) which is offered at both the Durham and Manchester campuses. This program prepares students to assume leadership roles in their communities, nonprofit organizations and other areas. By combining a theoretical foundation in community organizing, group process, organizational structure and political activism with service-learning and other community outreach efforts, the program provides students with a wide array of learning challenges and opportunities for real world application. Students recently won the state-wide Social Entrepreneurial Student Leadership Challenge for their work in creating the *Warmth from the Millyard* project, a collaboration among businesses, schools, nonprofit organizations and the University to heighten awareness about poverty in Manchester, NH, while providing warm clothing to those in need. This project, along with two others, has also been showcased at the National Service-Learning conference. For more information about the program, please feel free to contact Kate or to check out their Website: <http://www.thompsonschooll.unh.edu/colead/>

The CoLead Program is a natural extension of Kate's other work as a consultant to organizations, a volunteer coordinator and a community activist. Over the years, Kate has worked with dozens of organizations, from small nonprofits to large corporations, to assist them with supervisory development, strategic planning and improved communication. She has also helped organize and train volunteers/docents as both a teacher and manager. Since she has volunteered at countless events and for many organizations, she recognizes from both perspectives why effective volunteer supervision matters.

At the heart of all Kate's work is her passionate belief and commitment to civic engagement and community activism as inherent demands of a successful democracy and a decent world. As she wrote in a recent essay:

*A number of years ago, I was asked to speak with a group of emerging leaders from Russia about my work with the Community Leadership Program. At first, as I explained what we did, I saw nothing but blank stares. However, when I asked them to describe their ideas of community service, I learned why they seemed so puzzled. Under their former government, there was no sense of community service or individual efficacy. If there was a problem in their building, street, or community, they were supposed to wait for the "authorities" to fix it. They came to our country to learn how to promote citizen involvement and empowerment. I am honored that I come from a long history of community activism, both historically and from my own family legacies, and proud of what I contribute daily to UNH, my local community and beyond. I take my responsibility as a citizen very seriously and I believe that I try every day to meet the challenges of engagement and social justice.*

Kate welcomes feedback, questions and ideas. Please contact her at or at 603-862-1064.

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Energize, Inc., 5450 Wissahickon Ave., Philadelphia PA 19144

Phone: 215-438-8342, Fax: 215-438-0434,

E-mail: [info@energizeinc.com](mailto:info@energizeinc.com) Website: <http://www.e-volunteerism.com>