

# Digging, Dinging, and Developing People

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*By Dale Savage*

## The Situation

The other day at work I received an email from the second shift team leader. Receiving an email from her was nothing out of the ordinary, but the subject was. (Actually, the email was sent to the production manager, and I was only copied.) There seemed to be a problem with the back-up trainer in the injection department. According to the email, the team leader and some others had talked to the trainer about her responsibilities, but “she just wasn’t getting it.” The question to the manager was, “Now what do we do?”

The manager’s quick response was to have a counseling session, which amounts to a verbal warning in the disciplinary system. Immediately a passage from the teaching of Jesus in the Bible popped into my head. It was the Parable of the Fig Tree in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13. It goes as follows:

He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well:

and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.

— Luke 13:6-9, King James Version

As the company’s continuous improvement and training administrator, I knew this particular back-up trainer had not been in her position for very long. There had also been some other issues in her department that caused me to question if the assessment by the team leader was fair. I felt like the dresser of the vineyard in the parable. I had pity on the trainer and wondered if we had given her all the tools and training she needed to fulfill our expectations of her.

## The Suggestion

I decided that something should be done, so I clicked “Respond to All” and asked the question in my email, “Have we given her everything she needs to meet our expectations? I would like to discuss this and lay out a plan of action.”

With the approval of the manager, I scheduled a meeting with the team leader. I wanted to make sure I understood the situation completely. I started the meeting by asking what the current situation was. I was told the trainer did not seem to understand how she was supposed to do her job. Each trainer is assigned to three trainees and needs to use their time wisely to be able to

move among the three trainees and ensure they are not having any problems. The trainers also need to complete paperwork for each trainee. Apparently, this back-up trainer was taking time with the paperwork when she should have been training. Also, she had stayed a long time with one trainee “just standing there talking.”

I wrote on a white board that the trainer needed better time management skills. In addition, I wrote that the primary trainer did not like the back-up trainer and was not doing anything to help her. Those were the main problems brought up in the meeting, but the team leader added again, “But we have already talked to her about the issue, and she just doesn’t seem to get it.”

There we had it. The trainer “was told” but “just didn’t get it.” I took this as confirmation that we had not given the trainer everything she needed to meet our expectations, so I laid out a plan of action. The training technician from my department would work with the back-up trainer on second shift, shadowing and coaching her the entire shift for one week. She would ask the trainer what she needed, as well as observe her strengths and weaknesses. Then, the second week the technician would only work the first half of second shift, allowing the trainer to be on her own the second half in order to put her training into practice. The technician would continue to coach or answer any questions that may arise.

As the plan of action was put in place, I checked in regularly with the team leader to see how things were going. After the training was done, the two weeks following were a time for the trainer to be on her own to be evaluated further. After that two-week period, we had a meeting, just like in the parable, to decide “if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.” At least at that point in time we knew that we had tried to help the trainer as much as we could.

## The Shortsightedness

How many times has an associate been “cut down” when all he or she really needed was a little care to help them succeed? Management often wants a quick fix when something goes wrong in the manufacturing process, such as a quality issue or excess scrap. They look to see who is responsible, so that person can be dealt with quickly. By getting rid of the person they think things

will be all better, but this shows a lack of respect for their employees.

Following are some reasons this happens.

1. **Managers are afraid to admit they made a mistake by hiring an unproductive person or by placing a person in a wrong position.** Maybe they chose a poor quality “tree” and somehow if they admit the employee needs development, it will look bad for themselves. This is self-centered and an issue of pride. The managers are willing to sacrifice the employee to save their own reputations. These are managers, not leaders. Leaders would want to help people become all they could be.
2. **Managers do not want to take the time to work with the person.** We all know training takes time, and extra training takes extra time. The “digging and fertilizing” all takes energy. If the individual cannot catch on quickly enough by just being told what to do, the managers will find another “tree” (employee) who can. This mindset sees development as a cost instead of an investment. The managers do not stop to think they could be cutting down one of the best associates they may someday have. They simply do not have enough vision to see what the employee could become with the right assistance and encouragement.
3. **Managers do not see their people as humans.** They may say, “Our people are our greatest assets,” but they see the employees as the same kind of asset as the machines and robotics and other equipment used in the manufacturing process. If the associate fails, there are plenty of other “trees” out there to replace the one that is being cut down.
4. **It is easier for managers to blame someone than to try to fix the system the person had to work with.** Again, managers can just cut down the one who is underperforming and put another one in his place. However, if the soil is poor and nothing is done to improve it, the next tree is going to fail as surely as the one that was just cut down and cast aside. No, the systems that are given to the


associates to use must be examined to find out what is lacking. Often, the associates are doing their best with what they have been given and if no one is willing to do a little “digging and fertilizing,” better results cannot be expected.

After all the appropriate work has been done to help someone, there may come a time when everyone involved must admit that an associate simply is not fit for the job. If this is the case, it should be obvious to everyone involved. In these cases, the associate is not really being cut down, but rather transplanted into a different job for which he is better suited. The associate should feel a sense of appreciation that management was willing to try to help him or her, and the member of management does not have to feel that actions were taken hastily. Instead, respect can be instilled both ways.

Let’s learn from this parable so that we can see more productivity come out of the “vineyard” of our companies with as little loss as possible.

## The Solution

Regarding our back-up trainer, the extra effort to develop her and give her the tools to meet our expectations paid off. She was eager to learn and even more eager to please. She appreciated that we were willing to invest in her instead of just “cutting her down and casting her aside.” Because of the confidence that management showed in her, her self-confidence also improved.

Just as with any vineyard, there may be need for even further development of an employee as time goes on. But very few things in life are worked on once and then it’s done. When we think the job is done, that is when we begin to lose momentum. It is critical that we are always looking for opportunities to “dig, dung, and develop” our people. 

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**DALE SAVAGE** works as a business resource developer and advisor for Anabaptist Financial. Dale is from Arcanum, Ohio, and part of the Old Brethren Church. He spent 21 years in the automotive manufacturing industry in supervisory roles, employee involvement, and Lean manufacturing. He also serves as chairman of the board of the Brethren Heritage Center in Brookville, Ohio.

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