

## *Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers*

by Erika Andersen

Reviewed by Beverly Feldt

Say you're a manager. The people who report to you are pretty good, but there are a few problems, of course. You've had some management training from your company—mostly focusing on theory, rather than practice. Some of the approaches you've learned are useful when you can remember them in time. But, often you run on instinct, and often you regret it later. You recall vague terms such as “core competencies” and “coaching for performance.” However, it's kind of a jumble in your mind.

You've even read a few books on management, but most of them are either too simple or too abstract. Usually they tout one skill, such as listening, as the cure for all workplace ills. You'd give a lot for a clear, well-organized manual on the people side of management.

Got \$24.95?

*Growing Great Employees* (Portfolio, 2006) might be the handbook you've been waiting for. It's the best management training book I've seen.

Beautifully organized, comprehensive and straightforward, *Growing Great Employees* is better than its title. (And don't be put off by its unifying metaphor, gardening, which appears mostly in chapter headings and introductions.) Erika Andersen, founder of the consulting firm Proteus International, has put 25 years of experience into a reader-friendly, meaty guide to “all that people stuff.”

In admirably clear language, Andersen covers an astonishing amount of material: the hiring interview, TRACOM's Social Styles™, delegating, positive and corrective feedback, performance agreements—even how to fire someone. There's a guide for making sure new employees start out well; a technique for discovering the key responsibilities of a job; a model for changing your own mindset to become a better coach. Each topic is discussed step by step, and illustrated with dialogues and case studies. Diagrams and models are lucid, logical and easy to follow. Every chapter ends with a page of “Big Ideas” that summarizes the main points just covered.

Even more useful are the many practical exercises throughout the book. Called “Try It Out,” these experiments cover actual practice (using listening skills in a real conversation), planning (writing out statements and questions you might use in a corrective feedback session), analysis (filling out a job description template) and self-assessment (determining your preferred learning style). There are checklists and charts, and even space to write in the book.

But what makes *Growing Great Employees* a true handbook—and truly useful—is its structure. In the introduction, Andersen offers a summary of each chapter, acknowledging that many readers might not choose to read the book “in a straight line.” Since reading non-fiction books out of order is a secret vice of mine, I was delighted. What's more, throughout the book Andersen provides references back to earlier chapters as needed.

For example, in Chapter 4, during a discussion of non-verbal signals, she writes, “...if you're reading this book out of order, at this point you might want to go back and read the first chapter, where we focus on listening skills.” This interconnected approach, reminiscent of hyperlinks on a Web site, makes the book much more accessible if a reader is trying to work through a

particular management problem.

Throughout each chapter, there's a personal flavor, as if you were having a private consultation with Andersen. The tone is positive, down-to-earth and specific—a welcome change from most management books, which seem either to oversimplify or to wallow in impenetrable jargon.

*Growing Great Employees* does neither.

Non-gardeners may roll their eyes a bit at chapter titles such as “Staking and Weeding” and “Some Plants Don't Make It,” but Andersen has a charming way of laughing a bit at her own tendency to push the metaphor. (She says in the introduction, “I intend to wring every last drop [from the gardening image] by the end of the final chapter.”) It's not really a gimmick; it's more of a useful trellis on which some prize roses grow.

Is *Growing Great Employees* for you? It's worth a look. As productivity demands increase and hierarchies flatten, hiring and keeping good people becomes crucial. As Andersen says, “Most of the things that make employees want to work for a particular company can be provided by a skillful manager. I can help you be that kind of manager.” I think she's right.