

5 Tips for Knowledge Gardeners: How to Grow a Collaborative Learning Community

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"By nurturing a knowledge garden, you can increase the yield of your collaborative learning community. Imagine the impact a healthy learning community could have on your organization. How much is one additional sale worth to your bottom line?"

Imagine your workplace as an award-winning garden — a place where you nurture knowledge and success. A place where people grow and learn from one another by sharing best practices. A place where training content expands and improves through crowdsourcing. A place that's self-sustaining, dynamic, and always fresh.

That place is called collaborative learning.

So how do you create this magical place? You just launch a collaborative learning tool and people will flock to it, right? Not necessarily. People resist change. In the world of traditional hierarchy, people hoard knowledge and shun openness. The world is going open source, but that doesn't mean every organization's culture is open-sourced. New ideas and systems need nurturing. Growing a healthy learning community is a lot like growing a healthy garden. Here's how to start your own.

1. **Start a Nursery** — Expert gardeners start growing their gardens long before the growing season starts, using a controlled environment with ideal soil. By doing this they achieve greater seed germination, earlier and staged yield times, and are less likely to have diseased crops. As knowledge gardeners, we can apply this concept by starting our garden in an ideal environment where we know we can find success. Look for a business unit or group that is constantly learning and in need of new information, and whose job requires art and skill. This will be different for each organization, but for many the sales force embodies the ideal characteristics for starting a nursery. Once you've identified your group, you've likely found people hungry to learn.
2. **Cultivate Fertile Soil** — Expert gardeners know that a garden is only as good as the soil in which it is planted. Throwing high quality seeds on a rocky seedbed won't yield the results they want. The same is true for creating the right collaborative learning environment for your organization. So before you start, ask yourself what would get in the way of open sharing within your organization. Three potential obstacles are:
 - Culture — will people feel comfortable sharing?
 - Tools — do people have access to computers and the internet and know how to use them?
 - Time — is it acceptable that people take the time necessary to develop themselves?

As you answer these questions, think about ways you can foster your collaborative learning garden. Think outside the box. These are untraditional times, and learning needs untraditional attention to thrive.

3. **Plant Good Seeds** — Expert gardeners invest in well-prepared and high quality seeds. They know that the seeds sitting on the shelf at the big-box store after the Christmas decorations are pulled down won't yield the best crops. Using this analogy, free tools aren't free if they require time to customize, integrate, or work around. A patched-together solution will yield patchy results. When building a knowledge garden, your reputation is on the line. Expert gardeners aren't willing to jeopardize their reputations with low quality seeds. You shouldn't either.
4. **Fertilize** — Expert gardeners know that sometimes bumper crops need a little help. The same is true when it comes to our knowledge garden. Consider internal marketing initiatives that increase understanding of your learning environment and drive engagement, attention, and excitement. The first year, hold monthly contests for the best courses submitted. Judge these on the most views, most creative, or most professional. How about a learning scavenger hunt? Place clues throughout the system that require people to use different features (don't tell them that this is training — wink, wink). Get creative and have fun. Give people a reason to get involved, and encourage those who do. A little fertilizer will pay off great dividends in the harvest.
5. **Eliminate Weeds** — Weeds are inevitable. Expert gardeners know that weeds not only look unsightly, they also rob energy and nutrients from the plants that will yield. Expert gardeners routinely walk the garden and pluck the weeds as they sprout rather than waiting until the overgrowth becomes a "job." Be a regular visitor to your knowledge garden. Join the conversation. Follow up on flagged content. And seize opportunities. A weed may open the door for individualized instruction or initiate more discussion and sharing.

By nurturing a knowledge garden, you can increase the yield of your collaborative learning community. Imagine the impact a healthy learning community could have on your organization. How much is one additional sale worth to your bottom line? How many sales do you think a community like this could bring? How much would one avoided adverse event save your company? How many adverse events could you avoid through a community such as this?

Think about those questions and then start your nursery today.