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WE ARE ALL GARDENERS AT HEART

"We must cultivate our own garden" says Voltaire's hero, Candide. This sentiment is most apposite when it comes to developing one's own business and clientele. More is needed than the mere tools and techniques of marketing and communication, however vital they may be. To be effective a different "mindset" is indispensable and has to be established as part of the everyday culture of the consultancy or practice.

We can adapt the French philosopher's metaphor to our subject and apply a few basic principles to help us improve our own personal performance in growing our own businesses. These principles go beyond

the skills and know-how acquired through training programmes or on the job. In truth business development is much like gardening. It cannot be taught or picked up from reading books but has to be experienced by being out in the field! The way to progress and succeed is by means of personal trial and error. When we try to cultivate our clientele we behave just like gardeners. Regardless of whether the choice is imposed upon us or whether it is by our own volition, we have to nurture our clients in the same way that the gardener nurtures his flowers, trees, vegetables and fruits, in order to grow and develop.

What does the gardener actually do on a daily basis? What does "cultivating" really involve?

First of all, not only does the gardener have to plan his tasks according to the seasons and the weather but he also has to take into account how long it takes for the various species of plant to grow. The way he manages his time must account for unforeseen events over which he has no control. The routine he adopts must also take account of what can be achieved "at the right time", be it preparing the ground, sowing, pruning, protecting, cleaning, watering or picking the fruit and produce.

The sequence and planning of these tasks is vital otherwise he jeopardises a natural chain of events. The flowers may not bloom and the fruit may not ripen at the right time. A perpetual decision-making process is required to assess the multitude of tasks that have to be performed, the order and sequence of which cannot continually be disrupted.

It is difficult to reap what has not been sown!

As consultants we are exposed to the same type of choices when we try to balance time spent on production issues and time spent on marketing or sales. The objective is to find the right balance for bringing in new contracts and clients. Nor is there any magic formula because circumstances change constantly and can throw into disarray the best-laid plans made for the next day or month.

This necessity for planning is actually something of a dilemma for us because we naturally tend to do things which seem easy and with which we feel most at ease.

If sales matters are a source of concern or are causing us a headache we will tend to focus on production issues, leaving ourselves with very little time for business development. It is only by believing in the importance of business development and let's admit it – by enjoying it – that we will be able to use our time more effectively.

The gardener's second job is to "do what he has to do" without expecting immediate results. Any gardener knows that he cannot expect the cherry seeds he has planted on a Friday to transform into a fruit-bearing tree by Sunday. People who either expect or demand immediate results run the risk of feeling frustrated or of being tempted to rest on their laurels!

Business development, just like gardening, demands regularity and consistency of effort. Good business discipline is all the more necessary if the project is ambitious and involves several people. A lot of care and attention goes into looking after certain species after they have been planted or after the seeds have been sown. The plant needs watering, potential parasites need to be eradicated, it needs protecting from the heat or excessive exposure to the sun or cold etc. These precautions are all part of the necessary process which allows the plant to grow and bear the expected fruit, vegetables or flowers. These are tasks that may be delegated but they cannot be avoided.

WE ALL HAVE A TENDENCY TO DO WHAT COMES EASILY TO US AND WHAT WE ARE MOST COMFORTABLE WITH.

The same thing holds good for business development. It is important to repeat the same message and to cultivate "spontaneous awareness" of one's name or that of the practice or consultancy, so that it is "top of mind". Communicating one's expertise, maintaining a personal network of contacts and looking after client relationships, even when a case is over, are all vital.

The person who has won a healthy contract or a good client and relies simply on fulfilling his contractual obligations must beware. He will be all the more vulnerable to competition! Rather than being excessively concerned about future results (which do need to be properly forecasted, accounted for and celebrated when achieved) it is better to be sure that we are all doing what we have to do and that there are no obstacles or psychological barriers. It is important however to remain aware that we cannot control or guarantee everything.

Thirdly, the gardener must be prepared to experiment and learn from experience, be this positive or negative. Gardening involves continuous improvement and having to accept reality. Nature will not spare us our mistakes and our responsibilities. There is no earthly good in claiming that there will not be a hailstorm and avoid protecting the most fragile plants, because if a storm does brew, no amount of wishful thinking will prevent the garden from being damaged.

Gardening and client development are both prime examples of experimental activity, constantly testing our ability to act and think simultaneously about the results we have achieved (the analysis need not be too time-consuming). It is always fascinating to walk round a garden with a keen gardener who will be wondering "why hasn't this plant succeeded?"

He will spend part of his time trying to answer the question and the other part devising empirical solutions to arrive at his goal. Effective business development requires the same type of behaviour and questioning.

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a lawyer's business development activities or those of a team or an entire practice is often similar to the planned and structured visit round a garden. The questions are the same. "Why have you chosen to plant this variety on this piece of ground? What made you want to penetrate this market? Why has this oak grown so well here and not this one? How do you explain the success of this type of activity? What would you like to obtain from these plants next year?" Or for example, "what are your business objectives for the next few months?"

In business as in gardening, the tools, techniques and tricks can help in part to solve problems but it is the "mindset" of the people involved in implementing any solution which is also critical. The motivation of the individuals concerned will benefit just as much as the sales and financial results.

By following the progress of organisations working in the field of professional services (consultants, lawyers, architects, etc) it is obvious that business development is not so much the result of luck, as hard work. To put it another way, it doesn't come about of its own accord.

It is important to be ambitious and set clear goals and objectives when developing our clientele and our business activities. We are all able to do this. As with gardening, "the journey is every bit as important as arriving at the destination".

About seenago www.seenago.com

seenago is an independent consulting firm based in Paris (France).
seenago advises organisations in the course of their strategic, human and financial transitions.
Since 2007, seenago has been acting on all growth stages right from inception to international development.
seenago works with executives, private and institutional shareholders, as well as their teams in order to help them build and align their organisations to their visions. seenago assists its clients in :

- Formulating effective and innovative strategies
- Developing new activities in the professional services and technology sectors
- Managing organisational growth in terms of human capital and leadership
- Creating and setting up organisations
- Designing and implementing marketing & communication plans
- Financial structuring

