

Stop Hiring Trophy Collectors. Start Hiring Gardeners.

Here's what most C-suites get wrong about talent: they prioritize the resumes that looks best in a pitch deck. The elite school. The blue-chip client on the LinkedIn profile. The biggest agency. The awards, the mentions, the pedigree.

They're hiring trophy collectors.

And trophy collectors are expensive. Not just in salary—though there's that—but in what they cost the ecosystem. They hoard credit. They create dependency. They optimize for their own showcase, not the garden. And when a better offer comes along, they take their trophies and leave, because that's what collectors do.

Meanwhile, the people who actually build enduring organizations—the ones who create compounding value—are sitting right in front of you. You're just not looking for them.

The Trophy Collector Tax

I've watched companies burn through talent like kindling. They hire the shiniest candidate, the one with the most impressive previous employer, the one who interviews like they've already won. And then, six months in, the cracks show.

The work gets done, sure. But the team doesn't get stronger. Inexperienced people stay inexperienced. Knowledge doesn't transfer. The culture doesn't evolve—it calcifies around whoever shouts loudest or has the most leverage.

And then they leave. Because trophy collectors are always hunting for the next trophy.

The cost isn't just the replacement hire. It's the projects that stall. The junior talent that churns out because no one invested in them. The clients who feel the instability. The organizational knowledge that walks out the door every 18 months.

You're not building a company. You're running a turnstile.

The Gardener

Years ago, I worked with someone who was just a cog in the machine of a large agency. She was brilliant—one of the smartest people I've ever worked with—but she was young, and she was being held back by the perception that she wasn't ready for bigger projects.

She didn't have the pedigree. No fancy agency background. No trophy case.

What she had was something else entirely.

She took newer hires under her wing—not because it was in her job description, but because she wanted to. She gave them projects she knew they could handle, because she'd invested the time to actually know them. Their strengths. Their gaps. Where they might struggle.

And here's the part that mattered most: she anticipated where they'd need support, and she gave it to them in advance. Not as a safety net, but as scaffolding. She wasn't just getting work done. She was enriching the soil around her.

She made everyone smarter. Not louder, not more competitive—smarter. More capable. More confident.

That's a gardener.

The Business Case

This isn't soft skills theater. This is hard ROI.

We have 3x the industry standard for employee retention, with 90% of our people staying. We have 3x the client retention rate, with 84% of clients staying with us year over year. Both numbers are unheard of in our industry.

That didn't happen because we prioritized the most decorated candidates. It happened because we hired people who tend the whole garden, not just their own plot.

Here's what we've noticed: gardeners stay an average of 5+ years with us, while the trophy collectors we've hired (and we've hired a few) average 14 months. And the teams led by gardeners? Their client satisfaction scores are consistently higher than teams led by individual high-performers who don't invest in others.

Gardeners compound. They make the people around them better, which makes those people more likely to stay, which makes your clients more likely to stay, which makes your business more valuable. It's not a linear return. It's exponential.

Trophy collectors extract. Gardeners multiply.

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The logo for Truth. features the word "Truth" in a white, elegant script font, followed by a period. The background of the entire page is a dark blue gradient with a subtle, glowing grid pattern that resembles a wireframe sphere or a digital mesh.

Gardeners Attract Gardeners

Here's what happens when you hire a gardener into a garden: they thrive, and they tell their friends.

Here's what happens when you hire a gardener into a trophy case: they leave, and they warn their friends.

Gardeners want to work with other gardeners. They're drawn to places where their work compounds, where care is reciprocated, where the culture rewards tending to others, not just personal performance metrics.

Trophy collectors, by contrast, are in competition. They want to work with other trophy collectors because that's where the prestige is—but they're also threatened by them. It creates a culture of scarcity. Of politics. Of people protecting their territory instead of expanding the garden.

This is why one gardener hire isn't enough. You need critical mass. Because the best gardeners won't stay in a garden where they're the only one pulling weeds.

How to Spot a Gardener

So how do you find them? Because they won't always have the credentials that stand out.

To be clear: pedigree doesn't automatically make someone a trophy collector. There are plenty of people from elite schools and top companies who are natural gardeners. But the incentive structures at many prestigious agencies—the individual rankings, the competition for recognition, the star systems—often select for and reinforce trophy-collecting behavior. You need to look past the credentials to see what's underneath.

Here's what to look for:

Look for people who've been underestimated. Not because they couldn't perform, but because they didn't fit someone else's narrow template. They were too young, or came from the wrong company, or took a non-linear path.

Look for people who talk about "we" more than "I" when they describe their wins. Who can tell you not just what they accomplished, but who they brought along with them.

Look for people who've built things in poor soil—who've created value in under-resourced environments, or toxic cultures, or companies that were failing. They didn't just survive. They found a way to help others thrive.

Check their references differently. Don't just verify employment dates and titles. Ask former colleagues: "Did this person make you better at your job? How?" Read their LinkedIn recommendations—do people thank them for career help, mentorship, or opening doors?

Ask them to map their team's growth. Request they describe not just their own career trajectory, but the trajectory of people who worked with them. Where are those people now? How did they help them get there?

And here's the question that separates gardeners from collectors:

"Tell me about someone you've worked with who struggled, and what you did to help them succeed."

Trophy collectors will struggle with this question. They'll deflect, or talk about their own achievements, or give you a vague answer about "being a team player."

Gardeners will light up. Because that's the work they're most proud of.

But Here's the Hard Part

You can't hire gardeners if you're not willing to be one yourself.

If you're a leader who hoards information, who takes credit, who optimizes for your own trophy case—gardeners will see through it immediately. And they'll leave.

To hire gardeners, you have to build a garden worth tending. That means creating an environment where:

- People are celebrated for elevating others, not just personal wins
- Knowledge sharing is rewarded, not penalized
- Growth is measured by team capability, not just individual output
- Failure is treated as soil for learning, not grounds for dismissal

It means asking yourself: Am I building a place where gardeners can thrive, or am I building a trophy case and wondering why nothing grows?

I'll give you a concrete example from our company. We had all of our leaders co-author a commitment, an expectation, for every leader at the agency. And then we shared it with every person at the agency and asked them to help us live up to that commitment.

When it was created, there was nothing but positivity from every leader. But the first time we held senior leaders accountable to it, it became more controversial. How could we let go of a leader who had been here for so long? Because they weren't gardeners. And it's the culture we built.

So much so, that the first time when we held our clients accountable, by parting ways, because they were making it impossible for our leaders to live up to that commitment, it was no longer controversial, it was applauded.

And here's what happened: the people who became leaders already knew the leader that we, the whole agency, expected them to be. And they built stronger, more resilient teams. Attrition on their teams dropped by 60%. And the people who left? Most of them were trophy collectors who realized they'd have to change, and didn't want to.

That's what it means to build a garden. You have to make hard choices that reward gardening behavior, even when it's uncomfortable.

This isn't a hiring strategy. It's a leadership philosophy.

The Choice

You can keep hiring for pedigree. For the credentials that look impressive in an org chart. For the people who've already won at someone else's company.

Or you can hire for the people who will make your company worth winning at.

The gardeners won't always have the shiniest resumes. But they'll build something that lasts. And they'll build it with people who want to stay.

That's the choice. Trophy case or thriving garden.

But understand: you don't just choose who you hire. You choose who you are.

Choose accordingly.

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