



Leadership Secrets

Of The Chinese Bamboo Tree

by Michael Scott, MPA

My friend Chris has always been a source of interesting insights about leadership. None more intriguing, though, than what he shared with me recently about the workforce team he's leading. Possessing 10-plus years in a leadership capacity, he notes that less than 1 percent of the people that have worked for him truly achieve success in their role. In examining why this is the case, he came to an interesting conclusion: his top performers were able to master the art of "delayed gratification." In other words, they recognized that staying on task without attachment to immediate results was the key to their success.

Chris's message is consistent with that shared in a book I'm currently reading titled *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* by Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir. In it, the authors note a psychological concept called "Present Bias," which is defined as overvaluing immediate benefits at the expense of the future.

This is a concept that I'm sure you've had some familiarity with in the foodservice world. Like that new employee who begins inquiring about a pay raise after only three months on the job. Or senior management's mandate that you immediately reduce your staffing levels as part of a



THE STORY OF THE CHINESE BAMBOO TREE



larger plan to boost the organization's bottom line. And let's not forget your own overly ambitious desire to create an efficiently-run foodservice operation despite having been in a leadership role less than three years.

Because of our impatient nature, we naturally want outcomes to occur right away. This is where the story of the Chinese Bamboo Tree has relevance. It's an analogy that many management experts like because it's full of valuable insights and perspectives related to effective leadership.

As is the case with any plant, the emergence of the Chinese Bamboo Tree requires rain, nutrients, carefully

tended soil, and sunlight. This tree shows no visible signs of growth in year one. Ditto in year two—no apparent growth. And even in the third and fourth years, nada.

It's at this point that our patience starts to wane, leading us to assume our efforts were wasted. In fact, in desperation we may even be tempted to dig up the ground to see what's happening, an action that could put the manifestation of this seed at risk.

But the fifth year is when things get interesting, as this is when we experience the tree's growth. And not just a small amount of growth. It grows a whopping 80 feet tall in only six short weeks!

This begs the question, "How does this Chinese Bamboo Tree morph into a plant that's 80 feet tall in six weeks?" During that long stretch with no visible growth, the little tree was sprouting beneath the soil, building a network of roots strong enough to spark its phenomenal growth. It's this strong structural integrity that allows the Chinese Bamboo Tree to come to life in the dramatic way it does.

It's like that with people. Leaders and the people they manage, who pursue their dreams and objectives while facing challenges, establish the ability to be successful. On the other hand, those "gotta see results right away" types often find themselves ill-equipped for success.

If the planter had dug up the seed of his tree every so often to check and see if it was sprouting, it would have impacted the tree's growth. Similarly, a leader that has been in their role for a short time should not expect major results after just a few weeks of work. The bottom line is that sustainable results take time to manifest.

This story demonstrates how foodservice leaders should approach growth. Progress—while sometimes slow and frustrating at times—is definitely worth the wait, especially if we can persevere despite our tendency to be impatient. This lesson is imperative in acquiring new competencies and skills for developing ourselves and others. Our ability to stay focused even when growth seems like a fantasy leads us to achieve the outcomes we're seeking.

Most importantly, this Chinese Bamboo Tree parable challenges us to stay focused and remain steadfast in our belief in what we're doing. In a "want it now" world, this can be

Continued on page 16

challenging. We often find ourselves telling those who we supervise to “Give your best effort” and “Stay with it.” The change may come in stages and may even be challenging to see, but stay the course and you’ll eventually see the fruits of your labor.

As leaders, many of us find ourselves mired in organizations with a “gotta happen now” mentality. We become frustrated if the policy or operational change we are seeking to make takes a bit more time than we had anticipated. We desire immediate solutions to every complex situation and team conflicts. In short, we want it all to happen *now*.

An example of this is in hiring practices. There is nothing worse than hiring a team member too quickly to avoid having an unfilled spot and then having to endure the less-than-optimal employee for years. In our haste, we find ourselves using duct tape to address issues like this instead of looking at the root cause.

Overcoming this requires patience. Chinese Bamboo Tree growers have the belief that if they keep nurturing and fertilizing the ground, the tree will break through. And you must have the same kind of belief in your leadership abilities, whether you are taking the reins of a new foodservice department, leading a quality improvement effort for your team, helping to create an environment which fosters collaboration between all team members, or finding a way to work effectively with a new senior management team. All of this involves keeping the faith that your intended outcome will manifest itself if you persevere in your quest.

Yes, I know this can be challenging at times, particularly since we often get so excited about an idea that we simply can’t wait for it to blossom. Therefore, within days or weeks of embarking on this journey, we find ourselves discouraged and begin to second guess ourselves. Or we quit or retire cold turkey.

Giving up often involves the decision to dig up our seeds and plant them in another job or organization, hoping that we will rapidly ascend in more fertile ground. This frequently is the case with people who are job hoppers, those who switch employment often. Unfortunately, these people find that the grass isn’t always greener elsewhere.

Ever wonder if your leadership efforts are worth it? These feelings may be particularly acute when you attend an ANFP Regional Meeting or an Annual Conference and



The Chinese Bamboo Tree parable challenges us to stay focused and remain steadfast in our belief in what we’re doing, in the absence of immediate results.

visit with your peers who are having success with their trees. Or you may think, “Why am I trying to grow a Chinese Bamboo Tree? Another tree would have provided fruit much quicker.” You may be tempted to dream of times past.

The lesson here is that whatever you are pursuing can become reality if you refuse to quit. As long as you keep watering and nurturing your quest, it has a great likelihood of coming to reality, much like the Chinese Bamboo Tree. Sure it could take awhile, but eventually the roots will take hold and your Tree will thrive in unprecedented ways.

Here are the essential seeds for cultivating your own Chinese Bamboo Tree mindset as a leader in the foodservice and nutrition field:

1. **Think long range.** I was once taken aback by a leader of a multi-million dollar firm when he mentioned that the key to his success was the 1,000 year plan that he and the company had put in place. He went on to note that urgent, short-range leadership approaches serve as a barrier to legacy achievements.
2. **Just say no.** A key element of delayed gratification is the ability to say no. A sustained, consistent, laser-focus on your Bamboo Tree without distractions is the key to it coming to fruition.
3. **Ask for support.** Your objective is to ensure a sustained leadership focus over the long haul. Asking others for support is vital to your efforts.
4. **Expect lots of curves in the road.** Success on the road to growing your Bamboo Tree does not occur on a linear path. Expect to encounter detours and shifts amidst the changing seasons.

5. **Focus on you!** Delayed gratification is an “inner game.” As the great thought leader Jim Rohn once remarked, “Work harder on yourself than you do on your job. If you work hard at your job you’ll make a living. But if you work hard on yourself, you’ll make a fortune.”

So my question to you is, “How is this Chinese Bamboo Tree philosophy resonating with you?” Are you feeling motivated? What sorts of things will you start doing differently in your personal and professional life?

Delayed gratification and long-term thinking are the hallmarks of success. Simply focusing on the urgent and immediate will hinder long-term gains. So climb out on the limb of your Chinese Bamboo Tree today, for that’s where you’ll find the good fruit. **E**



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