



Growing Leaders: Lessons from the Paddy Field

In a world of instant coffee, instant noodles, and instant gratification, it's no surprise that there's a demand for instant leadership too. Yet, despite billions spent on leadership training and coaching, organizations are struggling. Post-Covid, employee engagement continues to dip, the so-called "great resignation" shows no signs of slowing, and younger professionals are job-hopping or leaving the formal workplace altogether.

Many argue leadership is in crisis. If so much is being invested, why are results so elusive?

The truth is simple: leaders cannot be grown instantly. A two-day program or even a leadership degree cannot magically create a leader. Knowing about leadership is not the same as being a leader. Leaders grow only within organizations that create the right ecosystem. Training, coaching, and mentoring certainly help, but only if the soil is fertile. Without that ecosystem, every program remains just that: a program, with little lasting impact.



Leadership as a Growth Process

Rather than lean on complex theories, I prefer to draw on our agrarian roots. Leadership, like paddy farming, is about growth. The word grow is deliberate: growth is organic, unique to each person. Just as no two plants grow the same way, no two leaders do either. Standardized, generic programs have limited effect if they ignore this truth.



Let's look at leadership through the lens of paddy farming.

1. Preparing the Soil

Farmers know that unless the soil is tilled and prepared, no seed will yield a good harvest. In organizations, the “soil” is the culture, policies, and processes. Recruitment, promotion, performance management, and competency frameworks must all support leadership development. Without this foundation, leaders cannot take root.

2. Choosing the Right Seed

Not all high performers are leadership material, nor does everyone aspire to lead. Identifying and nurturing genuine leadership potential is critical. Equally important is ensuring managers are not threatened by rising talent. Too often, insecure or toxic managers stifle growth, breeding cultures where leadership never flourishes. Unless leadership-ready individuals are promoted into positions of influence, the pipeline withers.

3. Creating the Right Environment

Paddy requires the right climate and constant care. Farmers nurture seedlings and carefully weed out anything that could choke them. Similarly, organizations must mentor emerging leaders, give them opportunities to lead projects, and provide continuous feedback. Training and coaching have the greatest impact when offered to those with true potential, not simply to those nominated by default.

Weeding is just as vital in organizations as in the field. Toxic behavior, if tolerated, spreads quickly. Values must be non-negotiable, and those who undermine them, regardless of seniority, should be removed. This clarity allows healthy leaders to grow.

4. Protecting the Harvest

Farmers don't stop at planting, they also protect their harvest. Likewise, organizations must focus on retaining leaders they've invested in. Retention goes beyond paychecks; it's about personalized development paths, meaningful work, recognition, and a sense of purpose. If you fail to protect your leadership harvest, competitors will reap the benefits.

The Bottom Line

Leadership is not a quick fix. It's a long-term investment in people, culture, and systems. With challenges mounting and competition intensifying, the only true differentiator an organization has is its people. But talent cannot be attracted, developed, or retained without a strong foundation of leaders at every level.

Grow leaders and the organization grows almost automatically.

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