

Unlock the Potential in Your Employees

Encouragement and nurturing--combined with the right training--create leaders for your company.

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I interviewed a woman named Karen Liu more than 13 years ago. She was painfully shy, insecure about her English-speaking skills, and her voice shook with nervousness each time she spoke. Today, Karen is the vice president of import operations at [Primary Freight Services Inc.](#) and manages a team of more than 20 people nationwide.

When I met Karen, I knew she had little experience in the American work environment. However, her answers to my interview questions showed that she had knowledge beyond that which her timid demeanor would lead one to believe. I knew her understanding of the industry wasn't something that was easy to find, and she had the potential to be an extremely valuable asset to the company I was working for. I went with my instincts and hired her.

From the first day, Karen's work ethic was outstanding. She was always on time, she often stayed late and she always made her deadlines. However, Karen remained incredibly introverted and shy. I constantly encouraged her, because I knew there was much more potential waiting to be unlocked.

When my brother John and I left that company to start Primary Freight, I knew we had to bring Karen with us. Despite having to take a [pay cut](#), she agreed to make the switch. She told us that her loyalty was due to the fact we had taken a chance on her by giving her the opportunity and continued to believe in her.

We knew that Karen had the potential to move up in the ranks if she could just break out of her shell. John took her on a sales call, where she met a Chinese client face to face, not only to provide a certain level of comfort for the Chinese-speaking client, but also to get Karen used to interacting with clients and become more confident. This was a launching pad for Karen, and we decided to send her to [Dale Carnegie Training](#) seminars to learn management/leadership, organization, planning and communication skills.

John and I introduced her to various books we felt would help her professional growth, such as [Good to Great](#) by Jim Collins. In addition, I made a daily effort to encourage Karen with small phrases or gestures, like praising her for a job well done, or always adding, "I know you can do this" when giving her a task that might be new or unfamiliar.

Karen has been with Primary Freight since we started in 1996, and I worked with her before that for two years. As the vice president of import operations, Karen is virtually unrecognizable as the woman I interviewed so many years ago. She is a confident leader with strong communications skills, and she now sends her [employees](#) to training seminars similar to the ones she attended. "Sometimes I can't believe how I grew to this level," Karen says today. "The training and encouragement helped me to realize my potential. Before, I would have never thought I could do this."

To identify "diamonds in the rough" such as Karen, you must trust your instincts. Recognizing the skills and knowledge that can be easily taught vs. the skills and knowledge that a potential employee should already have is an important part of this identification process. With Karen, I knew the [industry](#) knowledge and the work ethic were there; she just needed a boost in her communication ability and an understanding of what it takes to be a leader. After we started sending her to the seminars, I saw an immediate improvement in her confidence level.

It may take longer to see change in some employees, so it is difficult to quantify how much time and effort you should spend on the "nurturing" process. To this day, John and I continue to encourage Karen and our other employees, suggest books that may be beneficial to them, and also give them suggestions and constructive criticism. However, if it seems as though the employee is spending more time "learning" than productively working, you may want to reconsider your training program. There are many ways to maintain productivity and train simultaneously; for example, bringing Karen on sales calls and into management meetings helped boost her confidence, and she was able to help build our relationships with our clients as well as give us valuable input when making executive decisions.

Deciding what type of training you will provide an employee is just as important as making the decision to hire him or her. It's important to pinpoint the skills an employee needs to develop, so she doesn't waste time going to training sessions she doesn't need. We chose Dale Carnegie programs for Karen because the company has locations worldwide, and its course categories were perfect for what Karen needed. Dale Carnegie has courses in customer service, communication, employee engagement, leadership development and organizational development, among others. We also took advantage of the [California Employment Training Panel](#) program, which assists [businesses](#) financially with employee training so they can grow within California and compete in the national and international marketplace.

Although it seems like a lot of time, effort and money at first glance, nurturing programs result in an invaluable work force. Karen is a model employee at Primary Freight, and she now helps train other employees. Her confidence and skills are evident to all who come into contact with her, and her ability to pass on her knowledge will continue to benefit our company for years to come. Providing a nurturing environment for employees to grow along with your company not only produces great employees who contribute to your [business](#), but it assures your employees that you care about their professional and personal growth.

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