

Bonsai Samurai

by

Cliff Williamson

Creativity flourishes when two unlike or unrelated elements are successfully combined. Seeking a creative moment, I (a managing director of a moving company) enrolled in an afternoon Bonsai Course at the **Japanese Gardens of Buenos Aires** under the tutelage of the famous Japanese botanist, Hideo Sugimoto, amicably known as "Dr. Sugi."

Entering the classroom, I was surrounded by an army of "little old ladies," ...the bonsai groupies. They knew more than I did about the art of bonsai but far less than the master, Dr. Sugimoto. We crowded together at a small table. At each position, we found gardening tools, a wooden stick, a planter, bags of soil, stones, and moss, a few wires, some masking tape, and a piece of candy to get our digestive if not our creative juices flowing.

Returning students sat at the feet of Dr. Sugi for private consultation on their Bonsai projects. Some were ashamed, some proud. A few who didn't have the means to carry their specimens to the course brought photos instead and showed them off like new grandchildren. Dr. Sugi dispensed approval, criticism, and advice. Often he took shears in hand and made cuts and adjustments. He had all the answers; his advice was never questioned; he was King Solomon of the Plant World.

I was handed a pathetic stick with muddy roots, a poor candidate for the art of bonsai. But as I looked around, everyone else in the class was given a similar specimen. It was a form of spruce, I was told. Later we saw two examples in the garden, not bonsai at all, but towering trees. Nurturing this stick into a beautifully sculptured tree would be – I was told – my means to get to heaven. Or so bonsai legend says.

We cleaned and trimmed the roots. I was afraid to cut anything. I looked like a helpless father of a newborn who didn't know how to hold the baby. The army of "little old ladies" sensed my typical male uselessness and jumped in to save me with trimmers and shears. We formed a base of pebbles, then stuffed the pathetic tree into the pot. Using the masking tape, we fastened it upright like a radio tower in the middle of a prairie and anchored it to keep it from falling over. Frankly, it looked ridiculous.

In Argentine Spanish with a Japanese accent, Dr. Sugi explained to us how to measure the distance from the bottom of the pot to the top of the root, then mark that length three times up the height of the tree, and - *CHOP!* – cut off the tree at that point. This he did, and everyone present except for a few of the little old lady army let out a gasp. Dr. Sugi was a murderer, a slasher, a ***bonsai samurai***. In the case of my pathetic stick masquerading as a tree, the cut-off point was unbelievably low, less than halfway up the plant. All leaves and branches were well above the cutting point. Below was a stick as smooth and straight as the shaft on an old golf club. It took all my courage to make the cut.

Dr. Sugi rigged two wire loops to the top of the little stick, covered the loops with a plastic bag to form a bubble, and sealed the bag shut with tape. He then explained to us who sat still in shock that the bag shaped like a bubble at the top of the tree would create a sealed environment that would stimulate new growth. If the high temperatures for February in Argentina continued, we would have new shoots sprouting within a week. Two weeks tops.

I stared at my tree, pondering its nakedness. It looked nothing like a bonsai. It looked like a lollipop in a Salvador Dali painting. To shape and nurture this golf club shaft into a beautiful bonsai would take many years. I knew this because I had shipped a bonsai once for a friend. It was 90 years old at the time, and that was nearly 10 years ago. I have not received the invitation yet for its centenary birthday party, but I expect it in the mail any day. One hundred years is a long time to survive, avoiding serious errors or accidents, such as over-watering, under-watering, too much sun, not enough sun, a dropped pot, an aggressive pet, a rabbit attack, or who knows! Any one of these occurrences could bring a sudden sad end to the life of a bonsai.

Once the class was over, the Little Old Lady Army performed their clean-up, and I reflected on Dr. Sugi's lessons, drawing analogies to my work. It wasn't hard. Periods of strong growth are fantastic, but sometimes we grow too tall too fast and become unstable, risking the loss of balance. If a crisis hits, it is often necessary to make strategic cuts which can be painful and frightening. These cuts involve people we care about. They involve programs we work hard to create. When we stand there with shears in hand, will we hesitate? Most managers do, and their hesitation may prevent saving the roots and the trunk of their business. Today it is safer to act swiftly and risk making some wrong decisions than it is to wait... and wait ... and be too late.

We had to make some cuts recently. After Argentina suffered its crisis in 2002 in which we experienced massive devaluation, default, and our now-famous period of five presidents in two weeks, we enjoyed and exploited a mass exodus for 18 months. Suddenly, we found ourselves over-equipped for a diminished market. There were few people to move out, and many of our resources stood idle.

Fortunately, as has been historically true in Argentina for its long and neurotic history, the market is coming back again, but not before we said goodbye to several good employees.

Here are a few tips for those who find themselves in this situation.

1. Don't deny reality. Trust the numbers, and listen to what they tell you.
2. Rely on your finance and accounting people and take their advice. They are professionally trained to interpret the numbers, separating decision making from emotion.
3. Cuts start with yourself. Prove you are serious and sensitive to the loss of privilege, benefits, and extras.
4. Cut some visible though seemingly unimportant items to help make your point. Cell phones, office coffee, free parking. These don't represent a lot of money, but their loss serves to bring the message home.
5. Once you cut what you can, ask permission to cut more. It will tell you what your staff is made of. Most will cooperate. A few may not. Remember who gives makes sacrifices. There will be time for future rewards.
6. Voluntary cuts will stimulate the voluntary exit of a number of staff members who are less committed or less dedicated to the organization. Fight to keep the key people. Let the others go.
7. Know the cost/benefit of each type of reduction, and be prepared to wait three months for the benefits to begin to be felt.
8. Decrease finance costs by working hard to live within your means.
9. Break profit centers into smaller more accountable units so they can be more closely monitored, measured, and managed. They can then be more logically culled or expanded.
10. Simplify, standardize, share services, and outsource.

When Dr. Sugi sliced off the top of his tree, he was giving birth to something new, something beautiful. Cutting hurts, but it is sometimes essential for the good of the plant, for the good of the organization. Keep a sharp sword. Don't be afraid to be a bonsai samurai.

Cliff Williamson is the managing director of the Transpack Companies of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He invites to you come to see his bonsai, but says you may prefer to wait 50 years or so...