

## Pruning: Growth Depends on Getting Rid of the Unwanted or the Superfluous

I am not very good at growing plants. Somehow the gardener's microchip did not get implanted when I was at the factory. But I have always had great admiration for those who are good at growing things. Especially roses. If you have ever seen a healthy rosebush with its vibrant, fully mature blooms, you know the admiration that the one who nurtured that beauty deserves. So how do these people do it? Certainly there is talent and art behind every beautiful garden. But there is also a method behind the beauty. It is called *pruning*. Pruning is a process of proactive endings. It turns out that a rosebush, like many other plants, cannot reach its full potential without a very systematic process of pruning. The gardener intentionally and purposefully cuts off branches and buds that fall into any of three categories:

1. Healthy buds or branches that are not the best ones,
2. Sick branches that are not going to get well, and

3. Dead branches that are taking up space needed for the healthy ones to thrive.

### *Necessary Ending Type 1*

Rosebushes and other plants produce more buds than the plant can sustain. The plant has enough life and resources to feed and nurture only so many buds to their full potential; it can't bring all of them to full bloom. In order for the bush to thrive, a certain number of buds have to go. The caretaker constantly examines the bush to see which buds are worthy of the plant's limited fuel and support and cuts the others away. He prunes them. Takes them away, never to return. He ends their role in the life of the bush and puts an end to the bush's having to divert resources to them.

In doing so, the gardener frees those needed resources so the plant can redirect them to the buds with the greatest potential to become mature roses. Those buds get the best that the bush has to offer, and they thrive and grow to fullness. But the rosebush could not do this without pruning. It is a necessity of life for rosebushes. Without the endings, you don't get the best roses. That's necessary ending type 1.

### *Necessary Ending Type 2*

Some branches are sick or diseased and are not ever going to make it. For a while, the gardener may monitor them, fertilize and nurture them, or otherwise try to make them healthy. *But at some point, he realizes that more water, more fertilizer, or more care is just not going to help.* For whatever reason, they are not going to recover and become what he needs them to be to create the final picture of beauty he wants for the bush and the garden. These are next to go: necessary ending type 2.

As a result, the bush now has even *more* fuel and life to pour

into the healthy buds. The plant is now fully on mission, focusing its energy every day on feeding and growing the buds that are destined to reach full bloom and maturity.

### *Necessary Ending Type 3*

Then there are the branches and buds that are dead and taking up space. The healthy branches need that room to reach their full length and height, but they cannot spread when dead branches force them to bend and turn corners; they should be growing straight for the goal. To give the healthy blooms and branches room and an unobstructed path to grow, the dead ones are cut away. This is an example of necessary ending type 3.

Pruning enables rosebushes and other plants to realize full potential. Without it, they are just average at best and far less than they were designed to be. If you think about it, there should never be an average rosebush. By nature, there is nothing average about them at all. They are designed for incredible beauty and lushness. But if not adequately pruned, they never make it. And like rosebushes, your business and your life also need the same three types of pruning to be all that you desire.

## PRUNING YOUR BUSINESS AND YOUR LIFE

Do a dictionary search on *pruning* and you'll discover phrases like this:

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*A function of cutting away to reduce the extent or reach of something by taking away unwanted or superfluous parts.*

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Wow, if only we would lead and live by definitions! In the simple word *pruning* is the central theme of what a necessary ending is all about:



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*Removing whatever it is in our business or life whose reach is unwanted or superfluous.*

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In business and in life, executing the three types of necessary endings described above is what characterizes people who get results. (1) If an initiative is siphoning off resources that could go to something with more promise, it is pruned. (2) If an endeavor is sick and is not going to get well, it is pruned. (3) If it's clear that something is already dead, it is pruned. This is the threefold formula for doing well in almost every arena of life.

The areas of your business and life that require your limited resources—your time, energy, talent, emotions, money—but are not achieving the vision you have for them should be pruned. Just like an unpruned rosebush, your endeavors will be merely average without pruning. And here is the key point: by average, I don't mean on an absolute basis. There is nothing wrong with being in the middle of the bell curve in many aspects of life, as that may be what success is for that person or at least that dimension of life. I have friends who own small businesses of less than average size in their industry or by other measurements, yet they have a fully maximized, thriving enterprise for what it is and is supposed to be. Hundreds of employees and tens of millions of dollars is a great rose of a business and a life for what their talents, dreams, and opportunities consist of. Not the size of Microsoft perhaps, but they have achieved *fullness of maturity for their company and/or life. Alive and thriving to the max. But without pruning, they would not have gotten there.* And by the same token, if Microsoft or a much bigger company with tens of billions in revenues is *not* pruning, just because they are large, they can still be “average” relative to their own potential. They can truly be lagging behind where they should be.



So the question is more about this: are you only achieving average results in relation to *where you or your business or team is supposed to be*? In other words, given your abilities, resources, opportunities, etc., are you reaching your full potential, or are you drifting toward a middle that is lower than where you should be if you were getting the most from who you are and what you have? When pruning is not happening, average or worse will occur.

Too often, as bad as the results of not pruning can be, we still persist in avoiding it because it involves fear, pain, and conflict. Yet in order to succeed, we *must* prune. How does that make you feel? Conflicted? Welcome to the inner turmoil of necessary endings.

## GUT CHECK

In upcoming chapters, we will look at what lies behind our tendency to avoid pruning and how to name and resolve those issues. But before we get to the specifics, I want to ask you to ask yourself a few questions. Really ask. And if you are doing this with your team, ask these questions together:

- **What is your intellectual response to the idea of pruning?** Do you affirm or question the three kinds of pruning described above (too many buds, sick buds that will never recover, dead buds taking up space)? If you are on a team, are you all in the same place on the issue? If not, where is the misalignment? Ask around the table.
- **What is your emotional response to the idea of pruning?** Does it turn your stomach? Does it feel mean or uncaring when people are involved? Does it make you anxious in some way? Is it energizing? All of the above? If you are on a team, how do your emotional responses differ? Ask around the table.



It's vital to consider these questions because everything that follows is built on the premise that pruning is necessary, natural, and beneficial for anything that is alive. We need it developmentally (as we saw in chapter 1), and we need it in relationships and in business. We need it when things are going well and when things are not going well; it is a natural part of life's seasons and a requirement for growth.

If we accept the premise that pruning is necessary but still notice that we have an emotional misalignment with that premise, we will struggle to realize our vision of the future and our potential. But if you can become aware of your resistances and internal conflicts now, then you can begin to face them and work them through. If you have an intellectual antipathy to the concept of pruning, then I ask that you acknowledge that and agree to withhold judgment until you have read further.

Write down your answers to those questions. We will revisit them later when we look at the specifics of how our resistance to endings works. Suffice it to say at this point, though, that we all have them, and becoming aware of them and facing them is an important step to getting where you want to go.

Here is a recent example I encountered in a coaching session with Ellen, a high-level executive in a multibillion-dollar company. She had recently earned a significant promotion that moved her from the ranks of management into a senior leadership position. As a result, she was now responsible for creating the organizational strategy she had previously just implemented. Ellen knew she faced some challenges in making the transition.

"If I am going to make this work, if we are going to get from here to there, some people who have had leader roles are going to have to be moved out, because they are just not leaders. And in the new structure we really need true leaders. We won't reach our goals if we don't make that change," she said.



“Yes, and that will be your role. So where are you out of alignment with that?” I asked.

“Finding out that they don’t have leadership roles in the new structure will be devastating to many of them,” she said. “For my entire career, I have had a practice . . . I always think about the people I manage and see them in their cars driving home from work. I picture the kind of mood they are in and want them to be up and enthusiastic about their day at the company, and I work hard to make those rides home as positive as I can. But if I do what is needed, there are going to be some very negative rides home. I hit a wall when I think about it. It’s like it makes me go in two different directions inside,” she explained.

“Sounds like you think that ‘negative’ is bad,” I reflected.

“Well, of course it is. I would not want them having that kind of day,” she said.

“Have you ever had an infected tooth pulled?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Did you have a nice ride home?” I asked.

(*Laughing*) “No, it was awful.”

“Well, that was negative, . . . or was it?” I asked. “If you define *negative* as feeling crummy, I agree it was. But if you define *negative* as ‘harmful,’ I would not call it negative but positive. It was not harmful at all for the dentist to inflict that pain. In fact, it was a very positive event, right? A healing event?” I asked.

“Yes, sure it was,” she said.

“There is a big difference between *hurt* and *harm*,” I said. “We all hurt sometimes in facing hard truths, but it makes us grow. It can be the source of huge growth. That is not harmful. Harm is when you damage someone. Facing reality is usually not a damaging experience, even though it can hurt.”

I could see by Ellen’s expression that the implications of what I was saying were starting to sink in. “*As a leader, you have got to re-*

*define what positive and negative is.* Positive is doing what is best and right for the business and for the people. And nearly always, letting someone know that they are not right for a position is one of the biggest favors that you can do for them. There are only three possible results of doing that, and two of them are good. The other is good also, in that if it happens, you for sure had the wrong kind of person in the job,” I said.

“What are they?” she asked.

“First, if they find out that they were not performing, they may get better at their performance and turn into someone who can achieve. Your intervention helped them face the reality about themselves and moved them further along. If you had not done it, their next boss would have had to do it, and they would have lost another year or five. And go through all of that pain again. So you helped them face the truth about themselves and get better.

“Second, it may be that they are just miscast. And they need to find that out. Many, many times, when someone is removed, it is not because they are not talented but because they are in the wrong job or even business. The removal makes them face that; they find themselves, and they have a great next forty years. You helped them get off a road of failure and onto one of success. That is another great favor you are doing them.

“The third possible result—and the one that is diagnostic—is that they do not see that they need to improve or that they are trying to do something they are not cut out for, and they blame you or the company for their failure and go away bitter. They cannot see the truth and use it. They hate you and see themselves as a victim of your leadership. If that happens, you find out that you had someone in a key position who was probably not a learner (we will talk about diagnosing people later), and you have protected the company and yourself from their effects going forward.

“It is sad but true that some people just cannot face the truth

when it causes them discomfort, *but that cannot be a reason that guides your decisions*. So in that case, you are lucky to find it out and be done with that person's lack of performance, but moreover, done with their entrenched attitude about feedback," I said. "And remember, the big result of all of this is that you have moved the company and yourself toward the vision becoming a reality. That is your big responsibility."

"Wow," she said. "I have never thought that causing hurt for someone could be a positive thing. That could make it *a lot* easier to execute."

Certainly, as we went on to discuss, the goal is not to cause pain for people. But sometimes reality does just that. Reality sometimes makes us face things that hurt, and that can be a very good thing. For her, this conversation was a paradigm shifter that was going to enable her to do some "conflict-free" pruning, a concept we will hear more about later.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE YOU'RE PRUNING TOWARD?

When we talk about necessary endings, it's one thing to understand the theory behind the three reasons for pruning—good but not best, sick but not getting well, and long since dead—but it's another thing entirely to apply those concepts in real life. We can't execute endings in theory only, so they have to be clear in reality. The question is, What defines reality?

When pruning a rosebush, the first step is to ask, "What does a rose look like?" In other words, you have to know the standard you are *pruning toward*. The gardener knows what a healthy bud, branch, or bloom looks like and prunes with that standard in mind. The same thing is true in business and life—we have to have a good definition of what we want the outcome to look like and prune toward that.

For Ellen, the growth goal that the company had was the standard. The vision set by the CEO was crystal clear. That was why being put into her new position with his vision had so well defined what she had to do and made the conflict come to the surface for her. It *forced the pruning moment*. The pruning moment is that clarity of enlightenment when we become responsible for making the decision to either own the vision or not. If we own it, we have to prune. If we don't, we have decided to own the other vision, the one we called average. It is a moment of truth that we encounter almost every day in many, many decisions. For Ellen, the CEO's mandate had forced the pruning moment. She knew that if she shied away, as her initial internal conflict inclined her to do, she would fail to own the vision.

So step one for yourself or your business is naming the "rose"—in other words, defining the standard or goal you're pruning toward. There is no one right answer, but without some clarity on what you are trying to achieve, you won't know where to begin to bring about the necessary endings.

One of my favorite examples of this is the story of Jack Welch at GE. Welch was one of the best-known pruners in the annals of business. His approach illustrated both the success that pruning can engender as well as the conflict that it inherently brings to the surface.

Welch used four standards to make pruning decisions. Under his leadership, GE grew from \$26 billion in revenues to \$130 billion and from around \$14 billion in market value to over \$410 billion, making it the most valuable company in the world at the time. Here are the four standards Welch used to answer the question What are we pruning toward?

1. If a GE business could not be number one or number two in its market, it would be cut.

2. Any business that was struggling (sick) would be “fixed, closed, or sold.”
3. Every year, GE would fire the bottom 10 percent of the work force.
4. Welch would get rid of the layers of bureaucracy in the company that slowed down communication, productivity, and ideas.

These criteria paint a crystal-clear picture of what GE was pruning toward. And as you can see, it is not without the inherent conflict that pruning naturally brings to the surface. On the one side, GE’s success was undeniable. Besides the growth and valuation results mentioned above, it led to a time when twelve out of GE’s fourteen business units were leading their markets. On the other side, it earned Welch the nickname Neutron Jack, as over a hundred thousand people were laid off during his tenure. The principle of firing the bottom 10 percent had a negative image in a lot of people’s minds.

Welch’s standards illustrate many components of pruning. Being number one or two in the market clearly demonstrates the reward of clipping some of the buds that are alive and growing *but are not the ones that will make it to the top*. Remember, I said that a bush is going to produce more buds than it can sustain, and the gardener has to decide on some basis which ones will remain and get to draw nourishment from the stalk. For GE, being first or second is that concept in action. *It is in complete alignment with the reality that both businesses and individuals will begin, gather, and have more activities than they can reasonably sustain*. Some of those activities may be good, but they are taking up resources that your best ones need. So you always will have to choose between good and best. This is especially tough for some creative people, causing them a lack of focus. They create more than they can focus on and feed, they are attached to every

idea as if they were all equal, and they try to keep them all alive. Instead of a to-do list, they have a to-do *pile*. It goes nowhere fast.

Welch's "fix, close, or sell" standard addresses type 2 necessary endings: There will always be sickness. Businesses and people have issues. Our responsibility is always to "embrace the negative reality," as I have written about before in my book *Integrity*. And the way we address it should also give us a good diagnosis as to whether or not a problem or a person can be fixed. We will see that in the diagnostic sections later in the book, but the point now is that *we should not be dealing with negative realities in the same old way, over and over again*. At some moment, we have to determine whether or not our efforts to make a business succeed or to make a person improve are going to work. To do the same thing over and over again expecting different results is not only crazy, it is a recipe for staying stuck and not getting the rose you want.

Your attempts to fix should also include a realistic assessment of the potential for recovery and whether or not you are indulging in false hope. Leaders by nature are often optimistic and hopeful, but if you do not have some criteria by which you distinguish legitimate optimism from false hope, you will not get the benefits of pruning. *Sometimes, the best thing a leader or anyone else can do is to give up hope in what they are currently trying*. As we read in Ecclesiastes, there is a time to give up. Wise people know when to quit. Winners don't throw good money after bad. Or as the song says, they "know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." Welch's phrase to "fix, close, or sell" clearly implies that there will be diagnostic criteria that will force a pruning moment. Some people have a mantra of "fix, fix, or fix," but they never do because that branch or bud or person is just not going to be fixed, period. It's time to move on.

The "fire the bottom 10 percent" mantra is a clear pruning idea that encompasses all three categories—good but not best, sick and not getting well, and long since dead. I am sure that in GE's bottom

10 percent there were some good ones, some not-getting-well ones, and some who were just not producing at all, the deadwood. And I can understand why many people were upset with a fixed strategy like that for firing employees. But I do believe that there is *some number* of people in every organization and every life who will be routinely “let go” if leadership is doing its stewardship job. The very nature of people is that there are some good ones who are not right for you, some sick ones in denial who are not going to change, and some who are adding nothing. *Always*. So if no one ever leaves your organization or your life, then you are in some sort of denial and enabling some really sick stuff all over the place. And it probably is accumulating. I have found this to be rampant in companies that have a high “people value.” The value is good, but sometimes it keeps them from doing what is truly valuing to people.

So, was Welch really a Neutron? I will leave that for you to decide. My point is not that you have to have a strategy of firing a certain number or percentage; my point is that if you are truly leading, you *will* be firing *some* percentage. It is almost a truism. If you are not firing someone at some time, something is probably wrong.

Welch’s intolerance of bureaucracy illustrates well the pruning concept that there are some branches that are just in the way. They are not adding anything, and they are definitely in the way of the growth of the other buds. In Welch’s thinking, the bureaucratic layers kept the bright ideas and practices of workers from growing and being implemented into the structure of the company. Welch got the branches out of the way, and the growth propelled the company upward.

Good but not best, sick and not getting well, and deadwood taking up space. All three can be seen in these mantras that have been heralded to account in large part for the growth that GE experienced.

In this story, both the success and the conflict of pruning are so apparent. Pruning is not easy. It is hard and there will be people who don't like it, no matter what you do. You have to decide where your lines are, the values with which you will execute them, and go forward. Whether or not you prune in the Welch way is not the point, as his way doesn't fit all businesses or lives. The point is that no matter what your goals, vision, values, and metrics may be, they will force you to the pruning moment when you use them as the standards to evaluate situations and people.

Not every activity nor every person is a rose or will ever be one. One might be a great chrysanthemum, but remember, you are growing a rose of a business or life. So you have to begin by defining what you are pruning toward and the criteria by which you will keep or clip. We will spend time later helping you diagnose when to keep, fix, or clip, but for now what I want to emphasize is that step one has to be figuring out who you are and who you want to be. Two questions apply: How will you define success? and How will you measure it?

You can't prune toward anything if you don't know what you want. You have to figure out what you are trying to be or build and then define what the pruning standards are going to be. That definition and those standards will bring you to the pruning moments, wherein you either own the vision or you don't.

I recently had a coaching project with a venture capital group in the process of selecting an executive team for a new business launch. With the CEO now in place, they were evaluating candidates for the rest of his senior team. Using a five-point rating scale, with five being the best, I spent the day with them as they reviewed candidates. There were some very good people, but when I stepped back a bit, I noticed something peculiar. The individual candidates' performances were rated as mostly threes and sometimes fours. Because they were rating them individually, they were

missing the bigger picture. I told them that if they chose all of these people, they would ensure that the new company would have level 3 returns. Is that the kind of returns they had promised their venture fund? Probably not. The conversation turned at that point to getting a better definition of what a rose was and how to measure it.

“If you don’t know where you are heading, you’ll get there” applies to pruning as well. Define what you are shooting for, and then prune against that standard. That is when vision, goals, and even teams begin to take the shape that you desire.

### MORE THAN CUTTING EXPENSES

Sometimes people equate the concept of pruning with cutting expenses or “reducing head count.” They say things like, “You’re right. We have got some fat around here and need to cut some costs.” But cutting costs is not what pruning is about, and when someone says that, they are thinking more like a manager than a leader.

Certainly, routine expense reviews and cuts are good pruning practices, always. They should be done, and we should consistently ask ourselves, *Do we really need to be spending that?* (And have you noticed that many times after expense cuts the businesses are doing just as well?) That’s a good pruning exercise, but it misses the bigger picture.

The kind of pruning I’m talking about has to do with *focus, mission, purpose, structure, and strategic execution*. A mere expense cut might have enabled GE to keep all of the two hundred or so businesses it got rid of, if it had just followed a mantra to cut all expenses by 10 percent. As a result, the “average roses” would have then become even less than average, and we would not still be talking about GE’s accomplishments. So what we are talking about here is not just “cutting fat,” as the phrase goes. We are talking about defining what the bush is going to look like and pruning everything that is



keeping it from realizing that vision—be it good, bad, or dead. And that vision could be business or personal in nature.

In many businesses and in many people's lives, there is little definition like that. They continue to be involved in activities and with people needing all three types of pruning. And this is why mere cost cutting will not get you what you want. Just continuing to do the same activities but doing them "less resourced" will give you less of what you were already not happy with! Not too smart: "We have lackluster results, so we will cut resources in the same areas of focus to get better results." Really?

In your business and in your life, don't just "cut back" and think that you have pruned. *Pruning is strategic*. It is directional and forward-looking. It is intentional toward a vision, desires, and objectives that have been clearly defined and are measurable. If you have that, you know what a rose is, and pruning will help you get one of true beauty.

### SUBCATEGORY PRUNING

Pruning not only applies to the big picture, such as pruning toward a vision; it also applies to smaller categories of activities, in the little branches of life and business as well. I refer to this as subcategory pruning or micropruning. For example, let's look at how micropruning could be applied to a weekly meeting of an executive team, department, or project team. These meetings are about routine matters—you aren't firing anyone, eliminating business units, or reinventing key strategies—but the team might still benefit by taking some time to ask itself questions in the three pruning categories:

- What ways are we spending time in these meetings that are good and helpful but not the best use of our time together?



For example, “Let’s cut out going around the table and reporting in from each department on the status of every project. We need these updates, but we can get that information in an e-mail. Let’s use our time to focus on what can only happen if we are all together.”

- What do we do here that is sick and not getting well?

For example, “We have tried repeatedly to use these times for forecasting, and it just never works. We can’t get the information we need as the discussion progresses, and even though we have tried, it is confusing and a waste. Let’s stop using this meeting to do that.”

- What is dead and just taking up space?

For example, “All of the reviews we go through on operations from the previous time period don’t add value to our purpose here. It is not moving anything forward. Let’s stop doing that.”

The idea here is that it is not just an entire company or life that needs pruning; the devil is in the details as well. If people could learn to say things like, “We only have a little time, let’s stay away from certain issues and focus on what we can do something about,” or “Let’s use our time in a good way,” the resources of time and energy would be better spent.

In the personal realm, I have also taught this method to couples, and they see immediate changes. One couple reported back that they changed their weekly “date night” as a result:

“We used to take the time to have a date night every week, get a babysitter to spend time together apart from the kids. But, we would go out and end up talking about the kids, running the house, and all the things that we were trying to get away from. We lost the benefit of date night and were coming back not feeling very refreshed or renewed with each other and our relationship.



“So, we asked ourselves about the three categories and decided that there were good but not best ways to spend our time, things that we talked about that got us into conflicts that were not getting well, and some ways of spending our evenings that added nothing.

“Then we decided to make those off-limits. We started having real dates again, like when we were first dating, before kids and the challenges of running a household took most of our attention. We remembered what it was like when we first met and every minute gave more life to our relationship. And we did the things we used to do. Now we are looking forward to that night . . . it kind of grounds us now through the week. I know that no matter what is going on, that night is going to bring me energy.”

All of your precious resources—time, energy, talent, passion, money—should only go to the buds of your life or your business that are the best, are fixable, and are indispensable. Otherwise, *average* sets in and a meeting or even a date night does not become the rose it was designed to be. How many times have you heard someone walk out of a meeting and ask, “Why do we have these meetings?” Pruning might help that, or it might keep a couple from going to sleep after a date night a little more discouraged about their marriage. Pruning can bring health into the small branches of business or life as well as the big.

## IN LIFE AS WELL

One last reminder about pruning and necessary endings. The concepts apply to all of life, business and personal. Although this is a book contextualized in business and leadership, the concepts here will apply in every area of your life where you are spending yourself and your resources. And I say that not only as a helpful hint for you to look at all of life as a place for endings, but for another reason as well.



The bigger issue is that your character as a person works best when you are “integrated.” In my book *Integrity*, I talked about how the word *integrity* comes from the Latin word meaning “whole,” and how business and leadership work best when a person has an *integrated* or whole character. *They are then running on all cylinders and are the same person on the job as they are at home.* They are able to use all of their capacities in both places and accomplish their vision.

I have seen leaders who are not facing the personal issues that they need to face, and as a result, their performance in both business and their personal lives is being held back. You are one person, and as you integrate all of what it means to be a whole person, you will do better in every area of life. And learning to prune and execute necessary endings are important aspects of being a whole person.

For this reason, I recommend that as you go through this book, you see it as not just about business or leadership but about your whole life. In that way, it is about *you*. You are the one who is doing business and also doing life, and if you change and become a person capable of executing necessary endings, you will not only have better business performance, but you will also be less likely to raise failure-to-launch kids or be stuck in some other area of life.

So, with that, let’s get oriented to the idea of seeing necessary endings as a normal part of life instead of as a problem and find out how to execute them.