

Inside Trader Joe's Podcast Transcript — Episode 76: Growing People

[Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: This is an episode about growing.

Matt: Of course it is. I was just looking at sales info and the most popular products recently. Flowers, things like peonies, bouquets of flowers at the top of the list.

Tara: But this is about growing a business. We've been opening a lot more neighborhood stores lately, and we have more to come.

Matt: Ah, and one of the most important things about opening new neighborhood stores, growing the people in them.

Tara: That is exactly what this episode is all about.

Matt: Let's go *Inside Trader Joe's*.

[Theme music begins with no two bells at a neighborhood Trader Joe's.]

Tara: I'm Tara Miller, director of words and phrases and clauses.

Matt: And I'm Matt Sloan, the culture and innovation guy at Trader Joe's.

Tara: How many stores do we have at Trader Joe's now?

Matt: As of this moment, this podcast's release in August of 2024, 553 Trader Joe's stores.

Tara: That's a big number. And there are more coming, yeah?

Matt: Yes. Trader Joe's is growing, a controlled growth because it's not just about building buildings, what really matters is the development and the growth of the people in them, the crew, because they are what make those stores feel like a Trader Joe's.

[Theme music ends. Light upbeat music begins.]

Tara: We have with us three mates from stores local to the Boston area who came into Trader Joe's a little bit differently than the classic, start as a crew member, work your way up to mate and then, continue your career at Trader Joe's. These folks came into Trader Joe's as mates, which is not a common thing for us. This is a fun little group of people.

Chris: Hi, I'm Chris and I work at store 503 in Framingham, Massachusetts.

Claudia: My name is Claudia. I work at store 566 here in Seaport. Right in the heart of Boston.

Tara: Yeah.

Amanda: My name's Amanda. I work at 504 in Needham.

Tara: So, that's one of the original Massachusetts stores, yeah?

Matt: It was the fourth store to open.

Tara: Okay.

Matt: Actually, Framingham was the third Massachusetts store to open.

Tara: Five hundred wasn't the first

Matt: No way.

Tara: Okay.

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: Our number again, I've said this before...

Matt: Our numbering system is...

Tara: We could do a five episode arc on, "How do we number stores?" And nobody would listen. What brought you to Trader Joe's? Anyone can start.

Claudia: Claudia again here, when I first started shopping at my local one in New York where I lived, I used to walk out of there saying, "As a customer, I feel so great. I wanna work there and make people feel the same way."

Matt: Which store was this? Because we gotta give that store a shout out.

Claudia: Albany, New York.

Matt: Albany New York.

Tara: Okay.

Claudia: There is a local medical center and I was there with a family member. So went over to get some snacks for everybody in the waiting room. A crew member came to me and said, "You look lost. You need help finding something?" And I said, "I'm just lost," you know, and I think I might've started crying. I was upset. And, they disappeared and came back and brought me flowers and it was that point on, I said, I'm gonna shop here. The products are great and...

Matt: And the people are nice.

Claudia: So nice!

Matt: Turns out the people are nice.

Claudia: Yeah, so nice.

Tara: I love these stories because you can't make that up. You hire nice people and you give them permission to just be nice people. It's just human kindness. Chris, how did you decide to come to Trader Joe's?

[Music transition.]

Chris: I'd been a retail manager for 25 years. I had always thought that it would be the right place for me to work. I'd been a shopper at Trader Joe's for like 20 years. I actually

shopped at the Brookline store, the first East Coast store, when I lived in Brookline. And when I wanted to change companies, I just thought that was gonna be the right move for me because I already loved the products. (laughs)

Tara: Yeah.

Chris: I loved shopping at the store. It took me a little while to get in, but I did eventually get in, thankfully. (laughs)

Tara: And how about you, Amanda?

Amanda: Yeah, similar experience for me too. I come from grocery in my past. I had some past coworkers who had friends and family that worked for the company too, and I definitely knew it was where I wanted to go. I love helping people. Everyone's always so helpful, so kind. So I just kind of wanted to jump on board.

Tara: I imagine there's a lot to unlearn as well as a lot to learn, especially if you have a background in retail and, the way that most organizations do retail might not be the way we do retail.

Amanda: One thing that is definitely a big, not shock, but for lack of a better word, that I'm still trying to get used to is like there's no planograms.

[Retail jargon alert sounder.]

Matt: I think we need a retail jargon alert. Planogram. There's no central service office telling you where the ketchup has to go. Your crew members in your store, they make those decisions.

Amanda: Which I love. I love the freedom. You can take something from one department and cross merchandise it in another department, and I think that's great that everyone can have creativity.

Chris: For me that is exactly what I always say too, is the autonomy at the store level to be able to do what's best for the store and what drives sales, but also makes customers happy. You know your customers best. Like I, I've loved that aspect of working at Trader Joe's.

Matt: And that aspect could feel accidental. There's no plan. We don't know what we're doing. It's an ultra-Darwinian super competitive model where really the best things do survive the longest because they're the most interesting to the crew first and then to customers ultimately. So it, it is weirdly part of a plan to have no plan...o-gram. Is it o-gram or a-gram? Plan-a-gram.

Tara: I think it's plan-o-gram.

Matt: We've never had one. I don't know how to spell it.

Tara: I think it's "o."

Matt: It's plan-o-gram?

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: It's probably trademarked.

Tara: It probably is.

Matt: (laughs) We're gonna get a letter.

Tara: But if we write it plan O apostrophe, like it's an Irish plan.

Matt: We're in Boston

Claudia: See, I'm unique in the sense I'm coming with no retail. I'm learning the Trader Joe's way as I mean, I think the correct way. I think it's great.

Matt: It's weirdly beautiful and distinct, and it's unusual, right?

Amanda: Oh yeah. It's great.

Matt: Yeah, so I'm curious, this is a bit of a fill in the blank, for Chris. For you it's gonna be, "For me, Trader Joe's is..."

Chris: For me, Trader Joe's is food.

[Game Show ding, audience applause.]

Chris: (chuckles) I just think that the products are so great and perfect.

Matt: Claudia, "As a company, Trader Joe's is..."

Claudia: Life changing.

[Game Show ding, audience applause.]

Claudia: It has changed ways of thinking, ways of leaning on people for support, for ideas. Anytime you need a hand, a piece of advice, there's so many people at your disposal at any point.

Matt: Okay, "As a place to work, Trader Joe's is..."

Amanda: As a place to work I think it's just always learning.

[Game Show ding, audience applause.]

Amanda: I came in before Thanksgiving, so at the time it was just, I was a sponge. I was taking it as much as I could. But every day since then, I feel like I'm learning something.

Matt: Were myths busted with the Trader Joe's version of Thanksgiving? Or was it status quo? What was it like?

Amanda: I mean, I expected chaos and I got chaos. (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Okay. So we delivered.

Amanda: Oh yeah.

Matt: Okay.

Amanda: It was lines down the aisles every single day and I loved it though.

Matt: Thanksgiving might be my favorite holiday of all holidays.

Claudia: Well, when I first started working with Trader Joe's it's almost like a celebrity status. Like people were in awe. Sometimes just walking through the streets in Boston, if I have my Trader Joe's t-shirt on at lunch walking down to the waterfront, or I'm approached by people with questions or did you get the, this yet, do you have this in yet?

Matt: Is Kimbap still outta stock, really?

Tara: Do you have a mini tote in your bag?

Matt: And you're on break, but hey.

Claudia: Where are the bags? Where are the mini totes?

Tara: Do you have a secret mini tote that you can share with me?

Amanda: Yes.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: I've had the good fortune to open up sort of new stores. So I went to DC and um, in DC in the spring, you go see the cherry blossoms down on the mall where all the monuments are. My wife and I were down, we were having a picnic, we're walking and like all these people, like, "Hey, it's a Trader Joe's guy." And then they were lighting into me about stuff that was outta stock and so I knew like, I guess I'm home.

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: It was good. Yeah. Think about an aspect of your work at Trader Joe's that's important to you. You have one, Claudia?

[Music transition.]

Claudia: When I started with Trader Joe's, I found, and so far, it's still one of my favorite tasks is to work alongside of the crew members. Even though being a mate, it's showing them I clean the bathrooms too. You can turn around and your captain's on the register behind you. It's all of us. It's teamwork.

Matt: If everyone can do everything, we're covered. And it makes things way more interesting. You're not there to do this one thing and only that thing.

Amanda: That everybody does do everything.

Tara: Coming from a different grocery retail background, that's not the case.

Amanda: No. Everybody's kind of just in one department, one section.

Tara: And so if you're on a cash register, that's your whole job.

Amanda: All day.

Tara: Having an hour at a time on a register and then going out and working with product on the floor and helping customers, it just makes the day go by so much faster, right?

Amanda Yeah. You're always moving. I feel like I never need to go to the gym now.

Tara: (laughs)

Chris: I just enjoy the fast paced nature of the decision making that needs to happen on a daily basis, whether the truck is late, or you get something in that you weren't expecting, and you just have to make the choices in the moment.

Matt: What's something that might show up? Like I'm thinking like, "Hey, who ordered the kittens?"

Room: (laughs)

Matt: But like, what's something that shows up unexpectedly?

Chris: Oh I mean, stuff that is extra at the warehouse or...

Amanda: Or when things don't show up.

Chris: We didn't order but got instead by accident. I like to make those in the moment decisions to just make it work and make it successful and...

Matt: Sure. Yeah. If you can't fix it, you feature it and then it's not a problem.

Chris: Yes exactly. (laughs)

Matt: You have the opportunity to share with customers, many more customers, that thing.

Claudia: You just come up with more ideas too, and creative ideas.

Tara: You've been empowered to make those decisions, right?

Matt: So I'm thinking if you were to write a letter to yourself, you're now well established, confident, capable, Trader Joe's crew members, your mates leading crews in your stores, what would you say to yourself when you were just about to start knowing what you know now?

[Music transition.]

Amanda: Just be confident. It was very intimidating coming in at first, but, I've definitely gained a lot more of that since then.

Matt: Claudia?

Claudia: I think a lot of the same, I guess I thought being a customer, but coming in as a crew member, everybody is actually that nice. Everybody actually is that nice.

Matt: That is shocking in a refreshing way.

Tara: Right?

Claudia: It's everyday conversations. Just remembering that I have a daughter asking how she is or just people really are that nice, supportive and willing to help. If they see you lifting something, oh, let me grab the other end. And I think that they've brought more of that out in me, so I feel that Trader Joe's has made me a better person.

Amanda: Building those relationships with your crew really helps, knowing you have somebody that you could go to work, and you can have a nice conversation about, like you said, your family, or knowing that people actually care. Definitely feels good.

Matt: Oh, that's great.

Tara: Have any of you had the opportunity to do classes with TJU yet? Everybody.

Matt: TJU is, of course, Trader Joe's University, and it's more training our minds like how to think about a situation and what would be the best outcome. And it's not always the same thing. This idea of taking a situational approach is really important for us because there's so many variables.

Tara: Yeah.

Matt: Things just depend on conditions in that moment.

Tara: I love that program. I know that a lot of companies do like, training classes, but these, to me, seem unique in the way that they support the interpersonal relationships at stores.

Chris: I'd done a lot of those types of trainings with other companies, and I felt like the one here was so good.

Matt: Thing about working at Trader Joe's that was surprising.

Claudia: The people are actually that nice. And not only it's the generosity, um, the amount of donations that they give, it's just an overall generous company. The Shares Program blows my mind. So much product is shared to the food pantries.

Tara: It's such important work and it, you know, we're in the business of selling food, quite honestly, not giving food away, but when you have this perfectly edible food that is just not like it might be right leading up to its Best Buy Date, or it might have just passed, but it's not something that's going to be bad for anyone. People eat because of that food. People who wouldn't eat otherwise. We do it 'cause it's the right thing to do. You know, for years we didn't talk about it at all. We just did it. There are hunger relief organizations all over the country who routinely call the office just to say, nobody else does this. Can you share with us what your processes are? We only recently started being like, okay, we'll talk about it, we'll tell you about it.

Claudia: I tell all my friends and family about the Shares Program.

Matt: It is amazing having an idea is not as important as actually doing it consistently. Day in, day out, the crew is taking care of this in a way that shows and highlights the value that is in that food. This isn't trash. We're not treating it like trash. We're handling it carefully because we see this as a form of customer service, it's still for people.

Tara: I've had conversations with at least three crew members who said their first exposure to Trader Joe's was as a recipient of our Shares when they were struggling, when

they were, when they were younger, when they were children. And when they were old enough to get a job, it's the first place they went to go get a job.

[Small transition.]

Matt: You're at a rooftop reception for someone graduating actuary school, making small talk. People find out that you work at Trader Joe's. The first thing they say...

Chris: Oh my God, I love Trader Joe's.

Amanda: A lot of people bring up the Hawaiians. (laughs)

Matt: Really?

Amanda: Not in a bad way, of course, but it's just like, why do they wear the Hawaiians in there? And then I explain that everything's kind of like ship themed.

Claudia: I get asked a lot about the totes. Did you get your totes back in yet? Are they? Yeah, the totes.

Matt: I mean like you put little things in little bags, I get it, but what are you doing with all the totes?

Amanda: Many things are very trendy right now.

Tara: Eventually the Trader Joe's mini totes will be vintage.

Chris: Yes.

Amanda: I'm bummed.

Tara: Someone's gonna come into Trader Joe's 20 years from now with one of those totes and there'll be a new crew member saying, "That's so cool. Where'd you get that?"

Matt: And they'll put one banana in it.

Tara: Right. (laughs)

Matt: Cause that's all it can hold.

Chris: (laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Thanks for coming by. Thanks for your time.

Tara: You're all are great. Thank you so much.

Amanda: Thank you guys. Yeah, this was awesome.

[Transition.]

Tara: Matt, when I think about those mates and how they are focused on their growth at Trader Joe's, I think about how important having mentors has been in my career and in my growth as both a professional person and just a person, person.

Matt: And sometimes developing those relationships, well it just comes down to time, the incredible amount of time it takes to develop and we're growing, and we want to open new stores in new neighborhoods, and we want to maybe compress that time, shrink it. We want to help people make those connections and develop those relationships sooner. Let's talk with someone who's doing just that.

Tara: Hi, Deb.

Deb: Hello.

Tara: First time on *Inside Trader Joe's*.

Deb: Yes.

Tara: Welcome.

Deb: Thank you. Thank you. I'm excited.

Tara: You've been working on a program that is really geared toward helping people grow into leadership roles.

Deb: Yes. A couple years ago, we decided to, let's play around with mentorship.

Tara: Okay.

Deb: And we created a very loose program with not a lot of structure. And we learned for after that first year that there was a lot of interest. Fast forward to today, we've offered a program workbook now, so they have content every month to talk about. We actually have a mobile app that we utilize where we share...

Tara: Ooo.

Deb: Yeah, so we have TED talks and articles and discussion questions so they can engage with each other. Aside from their assigned mentor, they can engage with other leaders in the app. So we went from no structure to lots of structure, lots of opportunities to connect and engage with others in the program.

Tara: This is a mentorship program.

Deb: Yes.

Tara: Anyone is going to do better in their career no matter where they are or what they do if they feel like they have somebody who they can call a mentor. How does that work in this program? Like who are the people involved?

Deb: So, the program is for our mates.

Tara: Okay.

Deb: This year we had 800 mates apply to be in the program. (chuckles)

Matt: Fantastic.

Deb: We actually over the three years have gotten almost 1,000 captains and mates through the program. So we are at 960 right now.

Tara: Wow.

Matt: Fantastic.

Deb: Huge impact.

Matt: Just for the record of clarification, a mate, it's like an assistant manager, but so much more at Trader Joe's and a captain, I guess I could say it's a store manager, but again, it encompasses lots of other stuff. Maybe, for example, involvement in a mentor program. And when we talk about regionals, we mean the full title regional vice president. These crew members are basically overseeing an area, a group of stores, helping each captain in those stores deliver the greatest neighborhood store that they can. Is there a standard setup? Is it always a captain as the mentor?

Deb: Yes, actually it is. They apply to say that they wanna be a part of the program. If they're selected by their regional, we match them up based on their strengths and weaknesses. We look at time zone 'cause we wanna make sure that they can connect easily.

Matt: Wow. And it's making me think about the difference. A mentor program versus training. They're quite different. I'm curious, what are your points of difference between the two?

Deb: Yeah. Obviously, everyone needs training, but I think a mentorship goes a step beyond that. There's also that human connection. And so what we're also hearing is that not only is it helping me become a better leader, it's helping me in my day-to-day personal life because you have those relationships with people, and so you don't just start off with, let's dig into the mentorship. How are you doing?

Tara: Mm-hmm.

Deb: How are you doing today? I have this human person that I can always call and say, "Hey, I have a question," or "Can you brainstorm this with me?" Where you don't have that necessarily in a training format.

Matt: I have a feeling that after the program ends, there's no hard stop to people contacting each other. I'm thinking you've built a great rapport with someone. You're gonna probably still pick up the phone and just check in.

Deb: Absolutely. People are continuing to stay connected.

Tara: What kind of feedback have you gotten from captains who are involved in the mentorship program?

Deb: I think they're surprised at how much they're actually gaining from the program. That reciprocal learning is really happening. They are saying, "Wow, I'm taking some of this back to my other mates."

Tara: What have you heard from the, some of the mates who've participated in the program?

Deb: For the most part, it has been positive, that they enjoy connecting with another person. Some of them are even surprised at how much confidence they gain. That comes up a lot. It is beneficial from a fixed mindset to courageous conversations to

happiness advantage. So just things that not only can you use in your work life, but your day-to-day life as well.

Tara: Happiness advantage. I need a little bit of that.

Deb: (laughs)

Matt: No kidding.

Tara: Right?

Matt: I was gonna say that for a different program.

Deb: (laughs)

Matt: I don't know if I'm ready for it. I'm curious about this idea of a fixed mindset.

Deb: We are actually on a, the subject right now of growth versus fixed mindset and getting us to think of beyond our biases to be quite honest. Right? And so how do, what kind of perceptions do we have about the crew, our fellow colleagues, is that prohibiting us from interacting with them in a certain way? And so sometimes we have that fixed mindset about a crew member because they've been with us for 20 years and so we always put them in alcohol and that's all that they do, but we aren't challenging them to do more. So as we grow, we have to push beyond that, and give them some opportunities to do some other things in the store, even though they're great at that. Our comfort zone is to be comfortable with, but our growth mindset says, "Okay, what else can I do to challenge this person to be even better and let some other folks have that opportunity to work in alcohol?"

Matt: To open up opportunities for everybody.

Deb: That's right.

Matt: Interesting.

Deb: That's right.

[Music transition.]

Tara: As we grow, and we need to grow people, we need to expand how we perceive everybody.

Deb: Absolutely.

Matt: It's also interestingly parallel with a central business tenet for Trader Joe's. We always have new things to try, and we're always trying to bring new flavors, new foods to people, my fixed mindset would be like, "I really don't care for mayonnaise." And then someone would challenge me to grow through it. But that's the kind of thing that is just everywhere in our business. And it's really neat to see it applied to this part. How do we match people up?

Deb: You know? I have a magic wand, but...(laughs)

Tara: (laughs)

Matt: Do you loan that out?

Tara: And a cauldron?

Matt: Yeah.

Deb: Right? There it is. They actually answer a series of questions in the application, and so between their strengths and their opportunities, we also match that with a captain's strength. You could say I would prefer a female, I would prefer someone who has kids 'cause I'm struggling with work-life balance. Or one person asks for someone from a different country because they're from a different country. Some of it's just luck, I'll be honest. We've made some amazing matches that just happen to connect. But I think because of the type of people that we hire anyway, they're just open to any different perspective that might challenge them to think differently. And so it's easy. It really is.

Tara: What's your favorite part? What's brought you the most joy?

Deb: Just the feedback that I get from mates and captains on just how much this has benefited them. They always seek me out. They've asked, "Can I give you a hug? This has been life changing." The notes like I've gotten cards. It's just heartwarming.

Tara: Okay, Deb, here's the hardest question you'll get all day.

Deb: Okay.

Tara: What's your favorite Trader Joe's product?

Deb: Those pretzel, covered pretzels that we only offer like around Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Matt: Butter toffee?

Tara: Oh, the Butter Toffee Pretzels.

Matt: Come on now.

Deb: If I could just store them in my house...(laughs)

Matt: I know.

Tara: You can for a few months at a time.

Matt: Yeah.

Tara: And then they expire.

Deb: I've been trying. And then they expire.

Matt: Actually, Erin in recruiting and the HR team, she had just felt compelled to share that was her mom's favorite product and her mom stocks up when they're available. That is a great eating treat. Man, they're so good.

Tara: Yeah.

Deb: They are so good.

Tara: I had to stop buying those entirely.

Deb: Really?

Tara: Because I was treating that as a single serve bag.

Deb: (laughs)

Tara: This has been fantastic. Thank you so very much.

Deb: You're welcome. Thank you.

[Music ends. Transition music to close.]

Tara: The name of the podcast is *Inside Trader Joe's*, and this episode has really taken our listeners inside.

Matt: We are so excited by and proud of our crew. We really can't do it without them.

Tara: For everyone listening, we have more episodes on the way, so please hit that free subscribe or follow button.

Matt: It *is* free and worth every penny.

Tara: Until next time, thanks for listening.

Matt: And thanks for listening.