

Hiring and Keeping Good Employees

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Labor cost is the largest single expense in growing and selling plants. Consistently, nurserymen tell me that 20 to 60% of the operating cost is labor. Many of the associated costs such as fertilizer, pesticides, plant tags, and electricity are insignificant in comparison. Consequently, lowering labor cost is one of the most effective ways for a manager to increase year-end profit.

The people in your organization will determine your company's ability to grow and expand. Quality personnel will not only improve efficiency and reduce labor costs but also free owners and operators to do much-needed travel. I am often asked how our company locates and keeps quality personnel. I consider quality people one of our major strengths.

OUR ORGANIZATION

We have various levels of employees including basic laborers, skilled laborers, crew leaders, supervisors, and managers. The majority of our people are hired as laborers. They perform routine labor tasks such as weeding, planting, and tagging. From the pool we expect some to develop into skilled laborers, crew leaders and, later, supervisors. Spray applicators, equipment operators, and truck drivers are examples of skilled labor.

Once skilled laborers are identified they seldom develop to a higher level, not because they lack opportunities but because when they become good at a skilled position, they want to stay at that level because of job satisfaction.

Crew leaders come directly from the basic labor group. Some crew leaders step forward and become supervisors when opportunities arise. Seldom is a crew leader hired. Occasionally, because of previous job experience, we hire a crew leader. The same is true of supervisors. Supervisors most often arise from the ranks of the crew leaders. Managers have been hired from outside the organization but generally come directly from the supervisory pool. Basic laborers may work as part of a crew or a team to accomplish a task. The preferred arrangement is to work as a unit of one so performance and incentive pay can best be coordinated.

Crew leaders oversee a group of six to 12 people. They make more per hour than the crew members because of their leadership and organizational responsibilities. However, they can be rewarded by sharing the incentive rewards of their crew. They are expected to work along with their crew.

Skilled people are paid at a higher pay scale than laborers according to skill. They are not on incentive performance pay because generally quality and not quantity work is our first priority.

Supervisors coordinate the activities of 13 to 40 laborers and crew leaders. They are paid mostly salary with some bonus rewards. Managers oversee a much larger operation like a whole nursery, a nursery unit sales, a division; or they may be responsible for sales or production in all our nursery units. They are paid in a similar way to supervisors.

HIRING

The ideal employee has certain characteristics:

- 1) Energy, a drive to accomplish tasks and reach goals;
- 2) Communications skills, the ability to understand and to be understood and the willingness to use that ability;
- 3) Honesty and trustworthiness;
- 4) Flexibility, a willingness to do whatever is necessary to benefit the company;
- 5) Compatibility, the ability to adapt to an assignment and maintain a pleasant attitude;
- 6) Dependability.

Our company is not made up of 600 perfect employees. From top to bottom each of us is weaker in some areas and stronger in others. The challenge is to maximize the strengths and strengthen the weaknesses. Spotting undesirable characteristics that cannot be corrected and taking action is called effective firing. Everyone makes hiring mistakes. Accept that, and prepare yourself to respond in the interest of the company and other employees.

Interviewing prospective employees should first include a clear description of the job. Take the time to write a job description with a clear description of working conditions. Tell the employee how hot, cold, or wet it can be. Explain the pay policy and explain any performance incentive programs. We generally start labor at minimum wage and provide piecework programs that can add up to \$200 per week to their paycheck.

Interviewers should judge the prospective employee from body language, eye contact, and responsiveness to explanations. Athletes make good employees. State your working hours. Discuss your safety policy. Be sure that your company is familiar with and abides by the newly effective ADA law. The American Disabilities Act protects disabled workers from work-place discrimination.

At this time we might make a conditional offer of employment. The applicants who accept fill out a personal health history. You then hire those you think can do the job and explain benefits such as life insurance, health insurance, accident insurance, profit-sharing retirement plan, and vacation allowances. The benefit allowance package is very important in attracting and keeping good employees.

Our company offers family medical coverage at a reasonable employee cost after 6-months employment. After 9 months employees are given paid holidays. They are eligible for one week paid vacation per year after one year employment. Employees are insured for accidental death for \$15,000 after 6 months' employment. They also receive a life insurance policy valued according to their last year's earnings. The spouse is covered for \$5,000 and each child at \$2,500. This policy is effective after 6 months.

Another attractive condition of employment at our nursery is our emphasis on employee safety. Both OSHA law and our insurance company require a sound and meaningful safety program. We find that stressing employee safety lets employees know the company values them and is concerned for their welfare. Part of our safety policy features drug testing. Any employee who caused an injury is also tested. A positive test can be grounds for immediate termination.

We call a prospective employee's references. We don't hire people who have never been employed by the same company for at least one year, unless they are just out of school. Prospective employees who have drifted into the area recently stand a

poor chance of employment. We have them complete the I-9 immigration form which requires two proofs of citizenship, such as a driver's license, birth certificate, passport, or social security card.

KEEPING GOOD EMPLOYEES

Why do I stay with my present employer? I think my employees derive job satisfaction for the same reasons I do. If I can develop an employee-employer relationship that would satisfy me, I believe employees would also be satisfied and become long-term, good employees.

I am satisfied with my job because I like what I do and am part of a successful team. I consider my job permanent, which provides security for my family. The pay is good and the benefits are excellent. The owners of our company have let me know my services are valued. They are interested in my family and like to hear of their progress. They share my pride in their accomplishments. They allow me to participate in family activities by giving me flexibility to mesh my family and my job.

My job responsibilities are realistic, based on my experience and education. I have reasonable opportunities to grow, expand, and be creative. My immediate boss listens to work problems I encounter and, if possible, promptly helps me solve those problems. I sense his approval for successful projects. The people that are on my team are responsible, responsive, eager to help, trustworthy, and fun to be around.

My boss encourages me to rise to higher levels by pulling other employees up. He discourages me and others from trying to rise by putting others down. My employer pays me enough so that I don't consider employment by the competition. My employer pays me enough to solve my personal and financial problems, freeing me to solve his business problems.

I try to treat my employees like I like to be treated. I consider their ideas fairly. Even if one of their ideas is not new to me, I try to listen carefully and show interest. I can use this as an opportunity to help the person learn and gain experience. I also consider the possibility that conditions have changed since I tried this idea, and it may work now. Show an open mind. Encourage creativity. The most powerful asset your employee has is a brain. Your next significant cost-saving measure or profit-producing technique could possibly come from someone you least expect. Don't dwell on past minor mistakes. They may arise out of ignorance and may reflect poor management practices or failure to train employees properly. The second time one makes the same mistake is serious. The second time the mistake is because the employee failed to learn. Analyze the situation carefully because today's failure to learn can cost someone's life or business.

As a manager I try to provide a vision. That vision begins with where we have been, where we are today, and where we plan to be tomorrow. Good employees expect to be informed, and they should be.

Good employees contribute their abilities and share their knowledge also. They efficiently produce our beautiful nursery.

I respond to compliments from visitors by saying that I did very little. I try to tell employees about these compliments. However, I stand squarely with my people in accepting responsibility for problems and disasters. Mistakes must be shared. The next step is to help find out what went wrong and take steps to prevent the problem

from arising again. We don't want to be full-time problem solvers. We want to prevent the problems instead.

FOSTERING AN ATMOSPHERE OF TEAM SUCCESS

The operation of a nursery is similar to a sports organization. How concerned are owners about winning? Do they risk their resources? Are they willing to provide whatever it takes to win? How good a coach am I, or are you? How good is your point guard? How well does your sales manager perform? Do you and I create a team of can-do attitude with positive criticism, praise, rewards, and training, or do we instill fear of reprisal and penalties. Have we developed personnel who are willing to stick cuttings because that is the greatest opportunity today, or do they say that is not their job? Do I have team meetings to make my points as well as to hear their concerns? Do I treat people as individuals and use different techniques to motivate and communicate based on their personality differences? The employees of your nursery and the jobs they perform are like a chain. As the lead or coach should I pull the chain or push the chain? Are you pulling or pushing at your nursery?

The big challenge to nursery owners and operators is not to grow, sell, and ship the plants. The challenge is to find and keep good people to grow, sell, and ship the plants. As nurserymen we don't grow the good plants; we provide an environment for the good plants to grow. We don't hire good employees, we provide the environment for the good employees to grow. We will be successful in the nursery and in life if we are successful in making individuals a success.

Give responsibility and expect accountability. Give reasonable workplace freedom. Develop communications. Share prosperity. Share business concerns. Provide leadership. Be reliable as an employer. Don't tolerate weeds and certainly don't produce weeds. To have good employees you have to be a good employer.