

Practical Techniques to Improve Quality, Productivity & Morale

By Lou Benson, Ph.D.

When dealing with employees, you face unpredictability. In tree care, you don't deal with the same kinds of workers you would find, for example, in an office setting or a manufacturing plant. One of the questions that managers ask me a lot is, "How do I motivate my staff?"

In reality, there is very little that you can do as a supervisor, boss or owner of a company to motivate your staff. As managers we have better opportunity to de-motivate than we do to motivate. What we can do as managers is figure out how to nurture the sense of motivation our employees have. How do we set expectations for better quality results? How can we generate greater productivity with the people we have working with us? How do we build a stronger, more cohesive work team with higher morale?

If you were to ask your employees why they work in tree care, a lot of them would say because they need a job. If they just need a job they can work anywhere. The responsibility that we have as owners is to identify the purpose of our company and reinforce that purpose with our employees.

So what business are you in? Do the people that you have working for you understand the nature of your business or do they just show up, breathe the air and expect to get paid? I refer to those people as clock-punching potatoes because they punch in and then they vegetate. These are people without purpose or motivation. If there is no sense of purpose, then what will happen when the day comes when you really need them? They aren't going to be there. Those who have a sense of commitment and purpose understand the mission of the organization and are going to be committed and productive.



What we can do as managers is figure out how to nurture the sense of motivation our employees have.

Once, I was working with a small company in Texas and I talked to the owners about their mission statement. I asked them if they had a mission. They looked at me in a funny way and told me their mission was to make money. I told them that before meeting with them I had talked to a lot of their customers. I told them what the customers had said regarding integrity, quality of service and quality of product. None of their customers spoke about price. I found out that they were a high-priced supplier but that their customers would rather use them and pay the premium because of their quality and integrity. A mission statement must state your beliefs of why you're in business. Profitability is an important element, but it's not the only element.

Do you have a mission?

Are you on a mission or are you just sort of showing up? Mission statements are not difficult to put together. They should be simple. The following are some questions to consider:

1. Why are you in business?
2. Whom do you serve and who are your customers?
3. What do you do and how do you do it?

Are you in business just to cut down trees or do you preserve them sometimes, too?

Are you in business just to clear land or do you do landscaping as well?

Are you in business solely to eliminate nuisance trees or do you enhance the overall beauty of the land?

What are you in business for? What do you do and how do you do it?

I have called a number of TCIA members during the last several months and it was interesting to hear the different reasons why they're in business. It was a great question to ask. It tells us who we are – confident, skilled and dedicated professionals. If you believe in your mission statement, then read it when you have meetings, at the beginning of the day – this is why we're in business. Drum it into your employees' heads.

Have you ever noticed that, from the time you interview a person until the time they show up for work, something happens to them? There was a book written back in 1988 called *Workforce 2000* that predicted the type of worker we would have by the year 2000. It said that workers

by the year 2000 would be less competent, less dedicated and less skilled. They were off in their prediction because this type of worker showed up around 1995. A companion book, called *Opportunity 2000*, discussed how to motivate and how to work with this type of employee. It said first you have to give employees a purpose and a mission; a reason for being there. Will employees believe in the mission? Who knows? But if you keep drumming into their heads it might just start to sink in. They might start to realize they aren't just trimming or removing trees, that there's a larger purpose.

Communicate your culture

I was working with a company in Canton, Ohio, and one of the supervisors was talking about his promotion to mill superintendent. He told me that he had a mess on his hands because the mill has always been a money loser. Their tradition had been to lose money. He said that the union guys were rusted to the machines and didn't want to change anything. The only thing the management team was good at doing was stabbing each other in the back. I asked him what he was going to do with such a tradition and he told me, quite simply, he was going to change it.

Take a look at your traditions, where you come from, and the beliefs you have. Then ask yourself if these are the beliefs you want to carry into the future. Evaluate whether or not changes are necessary in these beliefs and values to influence what employees do when they come to work.

Relationships

How do we work with one another? In your business, if your workers and crews don't work together, what can happen? Accidents? Damage? Death? Face it, you're in a high-risk business and if you don't work well together everyone is at greater risk. How do you emphasize the relationship and the importance of working together?

I was at one company that had a new



How do you emphasize the relationship and the importance of working together?

supervisor. He told me he had a problem with his crew. They weren't getting along and he asked me how to get everybody to like one another. I looked at him and told him that even in a family people don't always like each other. I told him his job as a supervisor was not to get everybody to like each other, but to get them to work together.

Expectations

Do we set high expectations? Someone asked me what I do with the "card-punching potatoes" and I told them – 'fry em. With people like this you need to turn up the heat and get them sizzling right away. If they don't want to meet the expectation you set then get rid of them, because that kind of attitude can become contagious. Fry them or fire them but be done with them. If you don't, the good worker is going to think he can get away with poor performance as well.

Energy

Describe the things that drive your

company. What are the things that keep your company in business? What are the things that keep workers coming back day after day, year after year? What are the factors that energize the company? A lot of you have workers who are not from the United States. It's nice that they come from different cultures but you have to explain to them that they now work here. Part of our responsibility as executives and managers and supervisors is to communicate expectations and culture so that anyone coming in understands the rules to succeed.

Years ago the book *The One Minute Manager*, by Ken Blanchard, popularized the term "management by walking around." I was reading a business journal several years ago and the title of the article was *Management by Wandering Around*. I thought to myself, it isn't 'wandering' around, it's 'walking' around. It reminded me of a time when I was watching the evening news and they had a live sports-cam shot from a hunting lodge. This was a contest with a single shot division, a rifle division and an archery division. The

archer had won five years in a row and the sportscaster shoves a microphone in the guy's face and tells him how lucky he is. The hunter told him that luck had nothing to do with it. He said that when he goes out into the woods he knows where the deer sleep, eat and everything else because otherwise he would just be "wandering through the woods." If you're wandering through the woods in this business you'll soon find yourself lost. You need to know the game you're in and the game you're after.

Know the business you're in

Use your senses. When you go out to a job site, trust your instincts. Do you ever get the sense that something isn't right or just doesn't feel right? Get some sense of what is happening on a job site or with one of your crews. If things need to be corrected, correct them immediately. Don't procrastinate. If you are out there checking on crews and something isn't right, find out what it is and take action immediately.

If you go out and ask your crew what's going on, what will they tell you? Probably that everything is just fine. It happened in my office – I walked in and something just didn't feel right. I asked my secretary and she told me it was nothing. I went over to my manager, Fran, and asked her what was going on. She told me she had it under control, nothing to worry about. Now I am worried so I went to my "spy" to find out. She told me that none of the guys would answer the phone and the women were sick of it and they weren't going to do it anymore. Well, we settled all that with a schedule for breaks and phone answering, but if I hadn't listened to my gut instinct I never would have discovered the problem.

Spontaneous recognition

When people are doing well, let them know right away that you think so. There is a book called *The Greatest Management Principle in the World*, by Mike LaBuff, in which he says the great-

est management principle in the world is this: the things that get rewarded are the things that get done. What are you rewarding? Take a look at the time you spend with your crews. Do you spend your time with those who do well or do you spend your time with those who need improvement. One of the best rewards you have as a supervisor is your time. Spend time with those who do well as much as you spend with those who don't.

Respond

Respond to what goes on in meetings. If there is action you need to take, take it. If there is action employees need to take, follow up to make sure they do.

I spoke with a tree company owner who said is that he's a hands-off owner. This is the way empowerment should work. For some owners, empowerment is a difficult concept. I once had an owner tell me he

didn't like empowerment in their company because he thought it meant you didn't do your job; you gave it to your staff to do instead. I told him that was called abdication, not empowerment. I have a real simple definition of empowerment: having people do the job that you hired them to do.

As an owner, one of the problems we run into is that no one can do the work as well as we can. Have you ever had that feeling? No one is going to be able to do your job as well as you can. No one is as good at it. Please, hire people who are good so you can put your time and efforts into the areas that really make a difference for the company.

Dr. Lou Benson has addressed international, national and state associations throughout the United States, Canada and Latin America for 20 years.

GET RESULTS FASTER USING AIR-SPADE®

Excavate plant roots in minutes, without root damage. The air excavation tool preferred by hundreds of professionals worldwide for:



- Root Collar Excavation
- Root Pruning
- Aeration and Vertical Mulching
- Radial Trenching
- New Construction
- Locating Utilities
- Reducing soil compaction
- Treating Plant Diseases

Find out about the benefits that air excavation can have on plant health and your business. AIR-SPADE® has been proven the world's best air excavation tool, and "one of the few tools that pays for itself in one job".

Concept Engineering Group, Inc. (CEG)
888-55-SAFEX (888-557-2339)
www.air-spade.com; E-mail: ceg@air-spade.com

Please circle 1 on Reader Service Card