

## **WHAT THEY DIDN'T TEACH ME AT M.S.U.**

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I graduated from Michigan State University in March of 1982 having earned my Bachelor of Science degree in Turfgrass Management. Since then, my academic training has kept me in good stead and has allowed me to prosper and grow my business. But, with apologies to my professors, there are a few things that I was not taught at MSU that I had to learn the hard way.

### **IN NATURE, THERE ARE NEITHER REWARDS NOR PUNISHMENTS... THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES.**

We all like to think that if we could only do everything exactly like the researchers say to do it, then we would have perfect turf. Turfgrass is a science, after all, and so it's just a matter of finding the right formula, right? Wrong. As much as science is a big part of caring for turfgrass, there remains a great deal of art in it too. And so we are constantly tinkering with our formulas. The problem with that, is that many times we forget to consider the consequences of our actions. If we do not put enough fertilizer on the turf, for example, the color will be poor and the customer will complain. But if we put too much fertilizer on the turf, it may burn. If insecticides are used too much, we now know that the micro-organisms and other beneficial insects will be destroyed, causing heavy thatch and other problems to develop.

There are heavy consequences for using the wrong product for a problem. All of us have seen homeowners (and even some professionals) not read the label of a product and cause damage to a lawn. Yes Virginia, there is a difference between a weed control product and a grass and weed control product! And we all have been taught to properly diagnose a problem first before applying something to control it. Yet how many times do we make a snap judgment that it is a disease problem, for example, when in fact it is an insect. And then we wonder why we don't get good control of that disease!

Producing a high quality turf is a balancing act. Do something on one side, and you'll get a reaction over on the other side. Sometimes it's a good reaction, often times, it's not. I have learned to carefully consider the decisions I have to make because it will have a consequence. I just try to make it a positive one.

### **IN BUSINESS, THE REWARDS ARE FINITE... WHILE THE RISKS ARE INFINITE.**

It has truly amazed me, over the years, of the assumptions that people make about my personal wealth, just because I own my own business. Employees in particular, seem to think that I must be dripping in cash. Don't I wish that were true. But, if you look close, you won't see any diamond rings on my hand, gold around my neck or a gold-plated luxury car in the parking lot.

What most folks forget is that there is only so much cash that a business can generate. And we have to pay insurances, taxes, vehicle and equipment bills, chemicals bills, employee's salaries and on and on. By the time it's all done, there is not a whole lot left over for the owner. And yet, the risks an owner faces are enormous. We could

lose our cars, homes, property and even our families. Bankruptcy is always a possibility. One big lawsuit can take us out overnight. One mistake and we are ancient history.

Adding to the problems, is the fact that competition is as steep as it ever has been. In Michigan, there are over 800 licensed lawn care operations. (And who knows how many un-licensed ones!) And the amazing thing to me is that, that number has not changed a lot over the past 10 years. So I don't expect it to change much in the next 10 years either! But one thing that has to change is how companies differentiate themselves. Everyone screams about the high quality of work they will do, but we know that the public is getting quite fed up with the low quality of results. I read somewhere that out of Low Price, High Quality, and Good Service, a company can only provide two of those three items. While there is nothing wrong with being a low price service, something has to give. And if you truly want to be a high quality and good service company, you must charge something for it.

Above all, the best way to minimize the risks is to surround yourself with good employees. Building a dedicated team is paramount to success. The best way to do that is to communicate honestly with them. As E.W. Deming said, forget the slogans. Slogans such as "Quality Is Our Only Concern" won't mean much to your employees if you give them leaking trucks or busted spreaders to do the work. You must explain what things cost and what your vision is for the company. Your employees must be well trained and competent to answer questions from your customers. Never forget that your employees are your company. You must decide to be the very best you can be, and instill that same desire in your people.

Risks will always be a part of life and of business. But deciding to clearly define what your mission is, and having a good team to carry it out, goes a long way to minimizing those risks.

### **IN LIFE, IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW... IT'S WHO YOU KNOW.**

If you're like me, this old saying is anathematic to you. I like to think that whatever success I may achieve, it will be because I busted my rear to make it happen. But I have learned that it doesn't work that way. We simply cannot go it alone. And that is why I have gotten involved in several associations. Groups like the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation, PLCAA, LSAM, MDLA and others too. These groups have provided me with an ongoing source of new information and ideas that I would otherwise never have. No one is so smart that they can't stand to learn a new trick or two.

But even more than simply belonging, I have chosen to get involved on committees and Boards of these groups. Yes, it does require a little time and sometimes a little money too. But I can assure you that the rewards I have received as a result of my investing this time and money, has far exceeded what I have put in. Without even trying, I can think of five or six things that I now do at my business as a result of my activities with various associations.

But if you are going to join, then you have to get involved. There is absolutely no sense in paying dues to have your name on a list. The knowledge is not transferred telepathically! You need to come out to the Field Day at the Hancock Center and attend the seminars and the other functions of the many trade groups here in our state. What you will find is that, many times, what you learn in the formal seminar is not nearly as helpful as what you learn out in the hallway. Conversations with other professionals will teach you new tricks you never even dreamed of before. And since, in many cases, you are conversing with people who are not direct competitors with you, they won't mind sharing those ideas with you.

And while you're in the mood to join an association or two, expand your horizons a bit and consider a few outside of turf. Being a part of the overall "green industry", consider horticultural based associations. And don't forget business groups such as the NFIB or a local chamber of commerce. These groups will help you succeed just as much as a turf or lawn care group can. You ARE running a business, you know! Any, and all, contacts you make in this world can only help you in the long run.

In conclusion, while an academic background is very important to have, and I would encourage everyone to pursue one, the school of hard knocks teaches some valuable lessons as well. Carefully consider the consequences of application decisions, be focused on minimizing risks in business and be an active part of the professional community. We need to keep focused on why it is we do what we do. If you have a family, care for them and make them your absolute top priority. If you are not married, who are the important people in your life? Are you caring for them? Are we doing what is really important, or are we simply taking up space? Never forget that we work so that we can live. We do NOT live to work. Being the best we can be, means we must look outside of our own world and consider the needs of everyone. I challenge you to be the very best.