

MAKING THE EXPERIENCED OPERATORS OF TOMORROW

By Scott Beachy

Think about your starting day at your first job in this industry. You did not have any experience and never used any of what seemed like large equipment, whatever it was, dedicated mowers, sprayers, and tractors with different attachments or even loaders, backhoes or dump trucks. You were either one of two types: scared and unsure of yourself as far as running equipment or you were over confident and thought, “where are the keys?”

Now, jump ahead to today. Every year seems to bring one or two new employees to our department and at least half have no experience, yet they are still unsure and overconfident. So, how do you train them? First, I would check with your insurance company. Sometimes they will have training available that is at least partially relevant (usually the safety aspect) to the equipment you use. If not, ask them for any recommendations.

At our department, we do a blended program. We have employees attend classes and in-house training. Also, do not forget about continuous training. We try to send employees to some of these classes every one to three years to keep them safe and current. A lot of factors come into play when it comes to deciding when a person is ready to run a piece of equipment. It may be a time factor or if you have one, it may be a union issue. Once all the other issues involved have been satisfied, it is important to point out that you have to feel comfortable with an employee using a piece of equipment. I try to get through these issues to get at least one training session done as early as possible. I find that once a person starts to learn the controls and operation of a piece of equipment while watching other operators they will be able to learn a lot faster. They will ask themselves, “How is that done?” and pay close attention to that particular operation. They will pick-up on things that they would not have without that first training.

The first thing I say to a new trainee is, “This

is the most important thing I am going to tell you.” Then, I say slowly and clearly, “TAKE YOUR TIME.” That also means when you train someone make sure *you* have plenty of time and are not in a rush. You want to give this person a sense that he/she has all day. I start by explaining the controls and what they do. I also strongly encourage them to ask questions. When I am done explaining something I ask them if they understand and have them repeat back to me the functions of those particular controls. I give them an open area where they cannot do any damage or hurt anyone. I have them perform one function at a time and if I seem them doing something wrong I will stop them right away to prevent them from forming any bad habits. If it is a complex piece of equipment I may only teach them a portion of the equipment’s operation. Once they are comfortable with that, I will teach them the remaining portion.

We never put a maximum on the number of training sessions. We always want to do a minimum, but are willing to do more. Even if I think they are ready I will want them to feel comfortable and vice versa. Again, I do not want them to feel rushed in any way because being rushed is how accidents happen.

Finally, when they start using the equipment on their own, do not give them jobs that precision or speed are necessary. That is what your experienced operators are for. Let them get enough time under their belt before expecting these things out of them. After all, **experience is the best teacher.**

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