

# Management

## Keeping good help... the investment pays

Lawn care, landscape and golf course managers continue to be concerned about "turnover." Not only customer or member turnover, but also that which occurs within the staff.

Do you know how much it costs your company or club to hire and train new employees? How much employee turnover affects the quality of the work you do? Or what types of things can you do to reduce the expense and time invested in maintaining a good staff?

These are some of the questions Mark Cobb, president of Elite Landscape, San Bernardino, California, asked himself at the onset of his now 13-year-old business. He felt then, and still believes, that he had two choices: either hire temporary, seasonal labor; or hire a full-time, trained staff to get the jobs done. He chose the latter, and has no regrets.

"When we hire someone, we tell them we're not hiring them on a temporary basis," he relates. "Once they have passed a probationary period, we intend to keep them."

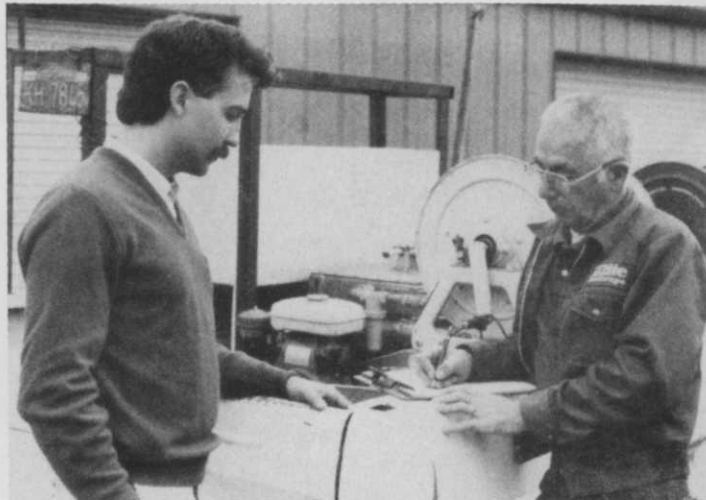
Today, the company employs 45 individuals, well over half of which have more than one year of tenure with the firm. Divided into three divisions — landscape maintenance, sprinkler repair/small jobs and chemical application — the company's more technically oriented positions tend to have the least amount of turnover.

### EMPLOYEE INCENTIVES, TRAINING

"We send as many people as possible to outside training seminars," Cobb states, noting that in a recent 2-month period, the company spent nearly \$1,200 on training.

"Each year, we send up to 15 crew chiefs to a horticultural short course offered by the University of California Extension Service."

Monthly staff meetings set the



Mark Cobb, president of Elite Landscape (left), and group supervisor Jim Bridges discuss a maintenance program for one of the company's commercial and industrial clients.

scene for all personnel promotions or bonuses, and even Elite's dress code is geared for incentive.

Uniforms are color-keyed for tenure and position, Cobb says. New employees wear light blue shirts, more experienced personnel wear dark blue and crew chiefs wear golf shirts bearing the company name and insignia.

Cobb concedes that one of the most meaningful of all the incentives offered by Elite Landscaping is represented by the color green...as in dollars. Health and safety programs have resulted in the company receiving rebates on workers compensation which is then divided among the staff. This year, it meant a bonus of \$124 per person.

In the meantime, Elite paid only 89 percent of the insurance rates charged to others in the industry.

Cobb also describes an attendance bonus program the company follows, where employees receive extra wages based on the number of consecutive weeks attendance standards are met.

"We realize that people get sick occasionally and have to take sick leave, but this is just an extra bonus for staying healthy," he maintains. "More importantly, it encourages preventive health."

### SAVING ON LABOR

Finding and keeping good help, plus training those individuals to use cost-saving tools and techniques,

are important to the success of Cobb's company. Chemical use, for example, makes it possible to provide high quality at a reasonable price. Preemergence herbicides play a large role in keeping the company competitive.

"Anything we can do to save labor makes us more competitive," he points out. "The whole business is manpower. That's why we use chemicals where we can, and why we strive so hard to keep experienced people who are qualified and certified to use them."

Surflan<sup>®</sup>, one of the mainstays of Elite's weed control program, has proven to be a valuable tool in holding down labor costs. Cobb claims that the herbicide "has been sprayed over the top of just about every shrub and ornamental that grows in southern California.

"The chemicals are making it possible for us to provide high quality and a low price — especially when it comes to hand weeding," Cobb relates. They stretch dollars invested in labor and allow the company to emphasize their employee retention program.

"When you're dealing with landscape maintenance, chemicals are only a small part of the total cost," he concludes. "Yet, they allow us to do so much more with our time and manpower. We'd be hard pressed to do business without them." ■

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