

# ORGANIZING SELF-SUFFICIENT CREWS

Front line people need to be empowered to respond to changes in our businesses. Highly productive, on-site crews can work to a higher standard than ever before.

By Phil Christian

If all, or part of your business includes delivering services to the exterior of existing residential or commercial real estate, then you and your company are subject to the natural laws we call "The Nature of the Business."

The "Natural Laws:"

1. We must deliver our service to the property because the customer does not have the option of bringing the property to us.

2. One or more of our people form a mobile crew to bring the material, equipment and technical skills to the customer's property to perform the services.

3. The service is mostly intangible and varies with each delivery.

4. The outside environment can not be controlled by us. It is ever-changing and often unpredictable.

5. The needs, moods, and focus of the customer are subject to change—without notice.

Most landscape owners and managers gained their experience in companies that had a headquarters, a base, with on-site support systems: information and communication systems; access to tools and equipment, materials; and training.

Today we manage mobile crews that by "the nature of the business" do not enjoy those support systems. We try to extend this support system to the mobile crews and are frustrated because it simply does not work.

We try in vain to supply supervision by meeting with the crews on-site, bringing information, instructions and directions. We even coddle



• We try in vain to extend headquarters support to on-site crews.

• We must structure crews to face the needs of the business.

• Crew chiefs must be able to work on-site with little supervision.

• Wean crews from middle management interference and watch them soar!

the customer and do a little training while we are there! We then rush to catch up with the next crew, reminding the dependent crew to "call us on the radio if you need support."

## No long-distance

The fact is, you can not supervise or support mobile crews long distance. They must be self-sufficient, self-sustaining, temporarily self-contained, self-motivated and—above all—self-

supervised. That is a lot to ask of hourly or minimum wage people.

We must re-define the role of the mobile crew and structure them to face the needs dictated by the "nature of the business."

The solution is to have a trained and experienced crew chief or crew leader that can provide the needed support for a limited amount of time, perhaps one working day. The knowledge, experience, and skills that now exist in middle management must be rolled down to the front line on-site people.

The benefits, which can be enormous, will include:

- Increased productivity and profit
- Increased customer and employee retention
- Increased quality
- Reduced management hassles
- More efficient use of overhead

## The solution

The solution to this problem is not easy: *hire, train, equip, direct, and empower competent crew chiefs who can produce the work on site with minimum or no supervision.*

This seems too simple. If the benefits are so great, why is "empowerment of the front line" not more popular in our industry?

The landscaping industry has a fear—with some justification—of spawning our own competition. We are afraid that if we make crew chiefs truly self sufficient they will chose to do it for themselves or move to a competitor in our market.

Added to that is the belief that we

have valuable or proprietary information that, if revealed to competitors, could destroy the company. This need for secrecy is left over from the developing days of landscape services.

The reality is, today your competitors already know what they want to know about your business, and don't care about the rest.

Routine legal precautions should discourage your crew chief from "opening shop" in your immediate market. The future will judge us in terms of how much our people know. Jan Carlzon, president of Scandinavian Airlines wrote, "An individual without information cannot take responsibility, and an individual that is given information cannot help but take responsibility."

#### Our colleagues

We are in the information age and landscape service crew chiefs are examples of knowledge workers of the 1990s. They are specialists who should be treated as colleagues. They have the skills and mobility to change jobs, and they cherish professional dignity as much as money.

It will become normal in the

1990s for landscape service specialists to change jobs more often than in the past. Most will leave, not to form

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their own company, but to work for another company that will allow them to practice their speciality without undue interference.

There will be fewer middle managers in the future because fewer are needed when the "power to get it done" rests with on-site people. Middle managers who are left will be coaches, facilitators, and trainers rather than line supervisors.

Self-sufficient crews, managed by working empowered crew chiefs, make better use of overhead. The existing overhead structure can sup-

port more self sufficient than dependent crews reducing the overhead that must be recovered by each crew.

Start now with your best crew and work with them until they reach an acceptable level of self-sufficiency. Wean them from the interference of middle management clutter, and watch them soar. **LM**



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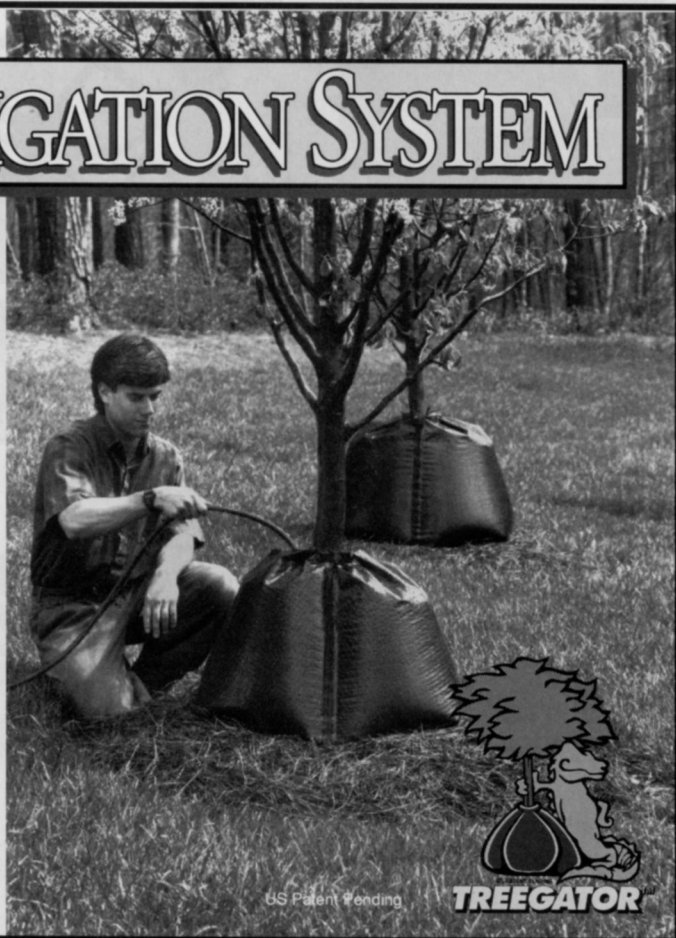
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