

Better training builds profits and sets standards for quality and safety

Maryland landscape firm discovers that company performance is tied directly to its employee training.

■ If you don't think you can reap real financial returns with your employee training program, think again, says J. Landon Reeve IV.



Reeve says a company-wide training program helps keep branch operations moving in the right direction.

A strong training program translates into a stronger company, says Reeve, president of Chapel Valley Landscape, a multi-branched firm based in Woodbine, Md. His company began a formal training program five years ago, and it started recording and tracking these efforts about four years ago.

Therein, claims Reeve, lies one of the cornerstones of training—record keeping.

The training records that Chapel Valley generates and maintains allow it to statistically gauge the effectiveness of its efforts. It actually matches the level of training its departments receive to their performance.

"The branches that are most productive and most profitable, did the most training," he says unhesitatingly.

Reeve maintains that a varied and well-thought-out program builds more self-reliant employees, employees that:

- ✓ produce more,
- ✓ have fewer accidents,
- ✓ maintain better morale, and
- ✓ are less apt to leave.

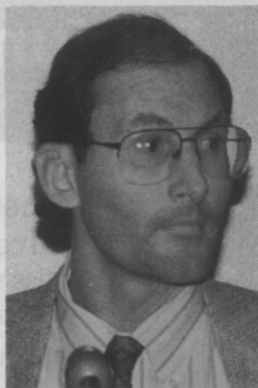
"You could see it just as clear as day," he says.

Initially, Chapel Valley's goal was to provide each employee 52 hours of formal training each year. However, the company's definition of training has since expanded to also include just about any extra or specialized knowledge an employee receives. That includes any employee, even managers.

Not too restrictive—"We don't try to write rules and regulations about what's training and what's not," says Reeve.

The company is, however, a stickler on recording and tracking its efforts. To get credit for the training, the employee must make sure it's recorded on the forms that the company makes available.

Actually, says Reeve, once employees see that training can help



Frank strengthened training because he didn't think new hires were getting the info or support they needed.



them with their own professional and personal goals, they become more responsive. That's one reason why his company refers to its training program as a Skills, Knowledge and Leadership Program.

David Frank, 34 years in the green industry, concurs that once employees understand that training can help them achieve their professional goals they're more likely to participate.

Let them do it—Participation is really what training is all about, says the president of David J. Frank Landscape Contractors, Germantown, Wis.

"We have to make training a participatory experience," says Frank. "We learn through our senses."

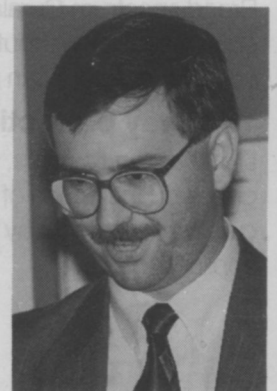
That's why he favors a mixed bag of training experiences, including question-and-answer sessions, hands-on demonstrations, and lots and lots of visuals. His company's video library contains about 350 titles.

"Probably the worst thing we can do is just stand up and lecture," he says.

Steve Leker, ISS Landscape, Tampa, Fla., suggests the following ingredients for a successful training experience:

- ✓ a comfortable location,
- ✓ willing employees,
- ✓ ample and appropriate training materials,
- ✓ a knowledgeable and enthusiastic trainer,
- ✓ a step-by-step approach to the material, and
- ✓ lots of repetition.

Says Leker: "If you can't find the time to train, you're not going to be able to find the time to correct the



Leker: show employees how to do something, then let them show you.

mistakes later on."

Setting standards—Bud Stephenson, owner of Caretaker Landscape Management, Inc. of Mesa, Ariz., and current president of the Arizona Landscape Contractors Association, recently began a training program in his maintenance-heavy company.

Initial training will be for crew leaders, and will show "how we want things done," says Stephenson. He says he realized the need to have some operational standards in place after six years in business, "before we get any bigger."

Continuity of work from one account to another is important in an industry where it's not uncommon to lose a contract to a lowballing competitor. The more professional and disciplined the crew, the better are your chances of retaining accounts from year to year.

Stephenson believes a good training program shows that the company cares about employee advancement. It also helps reduce or eliminate turnover.

Worker safety is part of the Caretaker program, which Stephenson has culled together from industry literature and videos, and some material offered by various suppliers.

Stephenson plans to videotape his own training program, custom-made for Caretaker personnel.

Leker, Frank and Reeve all spoke at the ALCA annual convention in Indianapolis this past November; Stephenson spoke from his office in Mesa, Ariz.

—Ron Hall, Terry McIver

Exchange programs provide peer group interaction

■ An interesting twist on employee training is the tried-and-true method of learning from others in your peer group. It's accomplished at the Chicago Botanic Garden through an exchange program.

Cindy Baker, director of education, says the program was started in 1989, "based on the premise that whenever two professionals meet, they have knowledge and experience to share with each other."

Participants in the program usually hail from area arboreta, zoological parks or universities, but just about any green industry professional is welcome.

"We invite (organizations and companies) to send their staff members here for two weeks, and so far 18 have participated."

According to Baker, having an opportunity to interact with someone from a different work environment is akin to re-learning or reinforcing some concepts and ideas that may have staled with time.

"And," adds Baker, "we find that people integrate new ideas into what they're already doing."

"The people who come to us wear many hats, so we try to specify what they do here. They spend two weeks in two different areas of horticulture."

The Chicago Botanic Garden staff is itself a group that's ready, willing and able to participate in continuing education. A recent poll by management revealed a need for training in basic "horticultural Spanish," and the classes were given soon thereafter.

—Terry McIver

Before you pick up your next pick-up

■ Dealers say emphatically that price is not as important as some other considerations when small businessmen purchase a pick-up truck.

"Service is probably number one to the buyer today," says John Kessen of Southwest Ford in Parma Heights, Ohio. "But service and trust run right together. It's important to the dealership that people come back again and again."

The overriding features that small businessmen look for in their trucks nowadays are, according to Kessen:

- 1) ruggedness, durability, "quality;" and
- 2) investment: how long it will retain a value.

Before you head to the showroom, try to picture how your new truck will fit into your overall operations over the next several years. Scratching out a list of jobs your new vehicle will perform will save time and confusion at the dealer.

"The first thing I want to know is how the truck is going to be used," notes

Landscape managers who run their trucks 'long and hard' need to be prepared before buying replacements.

