

STAFF TRAINING: more than books



Joe Bowers helped write Willow Valley's training manual.

For an effective employee training program, you have to envision it, believe in it, and have a definitive philosophy.

by John B. Calsin, Jr.

■ What is staff training?

● Is it watching a Lesco video on "Rotary Spreader Calibration" or "Irrigation Maintenance & Troubleshooting"?

● Is it, as the Associated Landscape Contractors of America says in its Safety Resource Manual: "Tailgate meetings... informal, on-the-job training and discussion sessions that bring the hands-on approach" involving a foreman and technician?

● Is it attending one of the Southern California Turfgrass Council's annual Turf, Landscape & Sports Institute sessions, complete with Spanish translation?

● Is it studying during the Davey Institute of Tree Sciences' comprehensive, four-week tree care training course?

● Is it sometimes a pain in the neck?

● Or is it all of the above—and more?

Here's an overlooked basic: "Anybody who comes in contact with customers becomes your company. If they're not responding to clients and the clients' needs, (the employees) are giving an image you don't want to have." So says Gina Schlesinger, president of Catalyst Resource Group in Springfield, Pa., a company that specializes in communica-

tion skills.

Schlesinger believes that one aspect of training is to help employees understand that the service provided to a customer is crucial and may be pivotal. It can lead to customer dissatisfaction, excessive costs, or to lost business. On the other hand, if the employee really understands that he or she is the company, positive interaction will mean satisfied customers and a stronger bottom line.

Writing the manual—Joe Bowers is manager of grounds at Willow Valley, a resort/business-and-conference-center/golf course in the Amish countryside of Lancaster, Pa.

Working with his predecessor John Rowe, Bowers helped write Willow Valley's training manual. The manual has a section on turf, with a subsection on overall mowing techniques and standards, with a sub-subsection, titled "Crossing Paved Surfaces."

Bowers or other experienced employees train new employees on each piece of equipment, working up from the less technical and dangerous to the more complicated. "We take time to show them the individual pieces, even pole pruners, before we turn them loose," Bowers says.

However, "it does get nerve-racking

sometimes. I'm sitting in my office and I know there is a new guy out there...(I wonder) how he's going to do."

Bowers has two suggestions for writing training manuals:

1) Make them fluid, able to evolve depending on changing equipment and techniques.

2) Don't make them cumbersome.

Across the country in Menlo Park, Calif., is Gachina Landscape Management, a six-year-old company that has grown big and fast. General manager Lance Schendorf wants Gachina's customers to view his employees as professionals and "not just janitors that work outside." So the company became involved in the California Landscape Contractors Association's Certified Landscape Technician program.

Schendorf says that seven of 77 total employees have either completed the program or passed one or more of its written and practical parts.

Two languages—Gachina has another training program, too: English as a second language for its Hispanic employees. The classes, offered at a nearby vocational technical school, are organized in five-week units. The votech provides the instructor and the company pays the cost.

"This program is so rewarding," Schendorf says, "it gives us goose bumps. The employees want to learn. Their faces just light up."

Gachina also offers in-house, one-on-one training on skills like mower operation, in either English or Spanish.

In Kent, Ohio, Davey Tree Expert's training programs "have kept us on the cutting edge," according to Dr. Roger Funk, vice president of human and technical resources.

In the winter of 1908, Davey began its formal training program. It has evolved into including employee orientation, at the annual four-week Davey Institute of Tree Sciences (D.I.T.S.) that simulates a



Newer employees should be supervised by veteran employees during instruction.

university classroom environment.

Computers used in the D.I.T.S. "level the ground for everyone, no matter what their previous education level," Funk says. During the training, a 3-D animation of a tree trunk developing allows trainees to see the inner workings of the tree as it grows: physiological changes, cell division and the like. In other words, the tree grows right before the student's eyes.

A philosophy—A company, Funk believes, without a planned growth strategy (that includes education) is bound to develop inconsistent practices. Customers do not get the same quality and type service from site to site.

"For companies in today's world, training employees is important to satisfying and retaining customers," Funk contends. "Training is a means of acquir-

ing good employees and keeping them—without which there are no customers."

Staff training is a two-way street: (1) management's attitude toward the employee and helping him or her do a better job; and (2) the employee's desire and then action to take advantage of management's willingness and helpfulness in learning more.

Staff training is not a matter of materials, courses or seminars. There are plenty of those. It is a philosophy with benefits for everyone.

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He is a frequent contributor to *LM*.
Training photos by Albin P. Dearing,
Davey Tree Expert Co.

It's the atmosphere...

■ "Atmosphere makes a difference," says Dr. Roger Funk of the Davey Tree Expert Company, discussing employee training. The problem is how to fit a training area in between riding mowers, leaf blowers and the workbench.

Here are some possible suggestions:

1) Have a specific area set aside as a learning zone, training area or classroom.

2) Make sure the training area has desks or tables and chairs specifically for training.

3) Keep training manuals, professional publications (including *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT!*) and textbooks in this location.

4) Encourage employees to receive and read trade journals.

5) See *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT's* January 1994 issue ("Rainy Day Training") for training videos available.

6) Try and cultivate a positive attitude toward staff training.

7) Set up a budget line item specifically for training purposes.

8) Encourage—and help pay for—attendance at "off-season" trade shows. This might be part of an employee incentive program or bonus to qualified employees.

9) If there is a college or university nearby, talk with the continuing education department about developing an internship program. For college credits, a student in the education department might help you set up a training program and then help conduct the training.

10) Most importantly, cultivate a training mind-set.

—J.B.C.

Even something as basic as rope-tying is covered in Davey Tree's training.

