Giving employees autonomy and encouraging risk-taking

You can't steal second base without taking a big lead off first. If handled properly, over the long haul, the risks are worth taking.

by Jerry Roche Editor-in-Chief

Senske Lawn & Tree Care of Kennewick, Wash. plays a symphony every day. At 7 a.m. sharp, 115 employees dash to 67 trucks at three branches and one satellite

office. And it's all music to the ears of Dan Warehime, vice president of operations.

"It's a symphony orchestrated by the branch managers and their supervisors," says Warehime. "We are highly specialized within our departments at each branch. Integrating those departments is the responsibility of the branch managers."

Growth of 20 percent for each of the past five years has been the result of a loose but well-defined management style.

"We give our stores (branches) a fair amount of autonomy," says Warehime. "We try to make it a fun place to work. The corporate philosophy is to give a guy enough rope to hang himself. Everyone is encouraged to be a risk-taker and make their own decisions. There's a lot of self-confidence that comes with working here."

The owner, Chris Senske, still keeps a close eye on expansion.

"I like to have a plan with a line drawn in the sand where the idea will work and where it's not going to work," Senske explains. "When one of the stores wants to try something new, like snow removal, I need a plan. I did not support that particular idea at all, but the branch wanted to do it, so I made sure they had a good plan. So far, it's been successful."

The music has not always been sweet. But by 1994, Senske Lawn & Tree's 48th year, its revenues were more than \$5 million.

"Some things that we've tried have been very unsuccessful," admits the company's second-generation owner. "In the mid-'70s we tried energy improvement insulation contracting. It failed. In the late '70s early '80s we made our first stab at grounds maintenance, and that was a failure. But we re-evaluated it and won at it in the '90s.

"Those have been the learning experiences. Most of the things we've done, though, have been very successful—like adding tall tree pruning and aeration,

Vice-president Dan Warehime (left) gives branch managers like Tom Talkington plenty of room to innovate and grow.

which are both closely related to what we do best."

Dominating—Senske Lawn & Tree, thanks to a long history and the aggressive managerial style of retired Army colonel and branch manager Tom Talkington, is the "dominant player" in the Spokane market. That branch provides about 50 percent

of the entire company's gross revenues.

Some of the confidence-building ideas Talkington has implemented in his four years with the company:

- He purchased route schedules from the local Post Office and built his service routes off them. If the Post Office routes are so efficient, why not copy them, he thought.
- Truck maintainance schedules are determined by hours run rather than miles travelled. Some spray trucks, he reasons, are running without moving, creating accountable wear on the engines.
- Snow service is provided like insurance. Area snowfall research showed that the company would normally plow eight

times a year (snowfalls of more than two inches). Customers buy a package that pays for 10 plows, but are told that the company will plow up to 12 times if necessary. It sounds like a real deal to the customer, but the system gives Senske snow jockeys a chance to increase their margins.

Talkington and the other branch managers must divvy up work among employees in four different profit centers.

Senske's Application Division—lawn care, including weed control, and tree care—provides 55 percent of the company's \$5 million annual revenues. The Maintenance Division—pruning, mowing, irrigation repair, etc.—accounts for 18 percent. The rest of the income is from the Construction Division (14 percent) and the Pest Control Division (12 percent).

Company thrust—Key words—the ones the branch

managers consistently hear from corporate headquarters—are "integrated grounds maintenance," "quality," and "response to the customer."

"We've also learned how to become very efficient at delivering precise amounts," says Warehime. But because the company continued on page 22L

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But the bigger challenge was finding and partnering with an experienced private grounds contractor.

Enter Top Care, whose headquarters are just several miles away. It had already shown it could shine with an atypical account by its on-going maintenance at the beautiful Missouri Botanical Garden, also in St. Louis.

But could it:

- shine on a campus where student security and sports field safety were as important as aesthetics?
- provide service for the university's incredible range of events?
- coordinate its efforts with several different departments within the university?

Communication, admits Top Care's Erbe, is almost as great a challenge as the grounds themselves.

"Sometimes when we get into a project, there are three, four or maybe five people we need to be coordinated with," he says. As frustrating as it sometimes is, this



Ralph H. Thaman, Jr., says grounds are important, but not at the expense of education or research.

is, to some degree, by design.

"We've tried to make our grounds maintenance a collective effort of a lot of people who have a reason to be concerned about grounds," says Thaman. "That's from a teaching, from a security and from a marketing standpoint."

Relationship building—Both men, however, agree on one point—the relationship between a university and a private grounds contractor needs time.

"It takes a couple of years to build a relationship," says Erbe. "The first year you're just bouncing around trying to take notes and get the work done. The second year you're planning ahead a little bit better. The third year you're doing a lot of things right."

In fact, says Erbe, grounds maintenance costs to the university stabilized as his supervisors and crews became increasingly more efficient there.

The campus account has given his onsite supervisors a great opportunity to grow as grounds managers, while it's also allowed Washington University to focus on its goals—teaching and research.

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must effectively integrate four different divisions, every employee must be taught "to look beyond the things they're delivering." And that's a challenge that requires training, training and more training.

"The turnover rate here is relatively low (less than 12 percent), except in the Maintenance Division, so our training is starting to take hold," Warehime notes. "We have 40 to 50 employees year round. In the winter, they're on half-time and unemployment, and that's when we give them a 40-hour training course."

Senske's business focus is on upscale residential. Its Application Division is 70 percent residential and Maintenance is 40 percent residential.

The Construction Division is mostly upscale residential.

High-profile accounts include Hewlett Packard and Kaiser Aluminum. But the company dabbles in other areas like grainery fumigations that require technicians to wear full scuba gear.

Such diverse jobs have earned Senske Lawn & Tree Care its well-deserved reputation of the local symphony orchestra—and it's as capable of playing Woodstock as the Hollywood Bowl.

