

Crew chiefs asked to do more with fewer workers

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

Crew chiefs provide muscle for most green industry jobs.

But competitive pressures are demanding even more decision-making responsibility and production from them....this as the size of their crews shrink.

"You have to put your faith in the crew chief," says Phil Christian, PDC Consultants, Alpharetta, Ga. "At some point you've got to turn your customer and the delivery of your service over to that front-line working foreman."

Crews usually contain no more than two, three or four workers, including the crew chief. Build crews may have a person or two more, but usually not many more.

In lawn/landscape, owners are going to smaller crews.

"Typically we'll send out a crew leader with only two other people," says Dale Stell, Lakeview Lawn and Landscape, Canandaigua, N.Y.

"That crew size will out-perform any larger crew. Maybe they look around the job site and they say, 'Geez, we're the only three guys here. We better get going or we're not going to have anything to show for it at the end of the day.'"

For larger commercial jobs, Stell prefers several small crews working on different areas of the project rather than increasing the size of crews. His 16-year-old, design/build company is 65 percent commercial by dollar volume.

Steven Glover of L&L Landscape Services, Santa Clara, Calif., says his maintenance crews generally contain just two or three people, while construction crews may, depending on the job, range from five to eight people.

"We've been in a program to upgrade the responsibilities of our crew leaders," explains Glover. "We want to develop crew leaders that take ownership of pro-

jects and personal interest in their sites."

Adds Glover: "We also recognize that it's our responsibility within the corporate to provide them the resources they need so they can be efficient and accomplish what they need to do."

Christian says the smaller the crew size, generally, the more production it will do per person. "I hate four-person crews," he says.

Christian points to the service delivery system used by the late Richard "Dick" Duke in building ChemLawn as a model of efficiency. (Christian was involved with construction before heading ChemLawn's Atlanta-based Commercial Division for eight years.)

In that system, the service deliverer was basically also a self-supervised crew leader.

"They could pretty much solve all the problems in the field," says Christian.

"They were not really that dependent on middle management."

He also cites fundamental differences between lawn specialist crew chiefs and maintenance foremen. The lawn specialist/foreman is more "technical" whereas the good maintenance/construction crew chief tackles projects like a "linebacker."

"He just wants to go and get it done," says Christian. "Your crew chief on maintenance doesn't behave like your lawn specialist and that's normal. You (owner) are the one who has to change gears."

Whatever the temperament, the crew chief must get the work done.

"That crew is either self-supervised or not supervised. There is no way you (the owner) can supervise a mobile crew, even with a cellular phone," says Christian.

"That means you've got some training to do. And you've got to hold your crew chiefs accountable." **LM**

Crew leader: can you do it?

A maintenance crew leader needs special qualities, says David Burnley, general manager of Contra Costa Landscaping, Inc., Martinez, Calif. They include:

► **Attention to detail.** Most crews can get the job to 90-95 percent. It takes a special employee to get the last details completed: the spent flowers by the front door; the turf in the first stages of water stress because of a plugged nozzle; the litter behind the shrub that is visible from inside the building but hidden from the street.

► **Organization.** From keeping his truck and equipment clean and orderly to his approach on the job site.

► **Communication.** Whether it's telling a supervisor about a problem on a job site or talking with a crew member about a better way to prune a shrub.

Brent Totman, general manager of Orkin Plantscaping, Knoxville, Tenn., adds these to the list:

► **Leadership skills.** The ability to influence the behavior and performance of others. Willing to accept the responsibility of authority and be accountable.

► **Technical skills** in applied horticulture and equipment. It gives the crew leader confidence to make good decisions in the field and be responsible to the customer.

► **A service attitude.** Having a genuine interest and motivation to serve others needs. A crew leader must be able to listen and respond to the customer.

—R.H.