

# Build your Workers

if you want to  
keep them

*Worker recruitment, training, and retention become more critical in 1998's low-unemployment economy.*

By RUTH E. THALER-CARTER



**Lebo Newman says training should be on-going.**

Once someone is on his team, Eric P. Cross seeks to "grow" them through development and rewards.

"We keep them focused," says Cross, president of Duke's Landscape Management, Inc., Hackettstown, NJ. "We make the work fun, as much as possible, by being creative, friendly and challenging." Cross also remembers the basics: "We pay well, often better than our competitors, and we offer bonuses, a 401K retirement plan and health insurance."

To encourage and retain his 40 employees, Cross has a policy of on-going rewards. We have monthly training sessions for all employees," he says. Once the work is done, we make it into a pizza party, with a birthday cake for everyone whose birthday is that month. If a crew has been sweating their guts out in the summer heat all day, I'll get them ice cream when they come back to the shop. I like to surprise people with gift certificates, ball game tickets." Cross also makes constant use of educational resources of state professional organizations, nearby Rutgers University and area junior colleges. He also occasionally brings in motivational speakers "to get people pumped up" and excited about their work.

On the practical side, Cross makes sure his company keeps its equipment and trucks in good shape. "That's a way of showing our people that we care about their safety," he explained.

One proof that these policies do result in valued employees, notes Cross, is that "other

companies often try to hire our people because they know our crews are well-trained!"

One area that Cross already is working to improve in the new year is the company's promotional structure. "We're bringing in a consultant to help us look at how people can move up in the company, among other concerns," he says. "We'd like to do a better job of that, because people who know they have a career path are more likely to stay with you.

In fact, we have a whole list of things we want to look at with the consultant's help to make things better in 1998."

All of these efforts are not only important but invaluable for any landscape company looking to succeed in the new year, especially one with a goal like Cross's of 20 to 25 percent growth this year. "Our employees make the company," says Cross. "They are our most important asset."

The static nature of the local economy is pushing Tim Aalbu, president of Aalbu Landscape Maintenance in Everett, Wash., to recruit harder. "We will be working with our state association on cooperative job fairs, to promote both our industry and our own companies," he says.

He will also be working outside the industry with organizations like the Private Industry Council.

"Unemployment is at its lowest in our area since the early 1970s, the local market has dried up, so we're going out of our area to look for new people," he says.

This may include offering a shuttle service to pick up and

return workers needing to ride a ferry to work. Or, "we may create partnerships with agencies that work with the disabled and disadvantaged," Aalbu says. "We'd have to be careful about the type of job, but we believe this is an untapped niche in the workforce."

While looking for new people in new places, Aalbu also works hard to keep those already in the company. "We just had our annual company holiday party, and gave out \$20,000 in bonuses," he said. "The labor market meant that we were very short-staffed throughout the year, and everyone did extra work."

Aalbu also started a 401K retirement plan and kicked in \$10,000.

Realizing the employees who feel valued tend to stay put, Aalbu says he gives "a lot of attaboys" and is aware of every good thing an employee does that deserves a little extra recognition.

"We do a lot of little things to make people feel encouraged and appreciated."

Training is another way of rewarding, encouraging and motivating staff, but it's also vital to providing valuable service and building client loyalty.

Training is vital for Redwood Landscaping in Santa Rosa, Calif., according to Lebo Newman, president. His exterior commercial maintenance company operates across nine counties in northern California and has about 200 employees during peak seasons.

Redwood invests at the front end of the process, by "spending a lot of time making sure a new employee will fit in"

before hiring, and then providing on-going training with an eye toward developing career employees.

The company's training program reflects Newman's long-time involvement in industry certification, which originated with the California Association of Landscape Contractors (CALC) and now is a focus of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA).

"Our training program has been linked to certification all along, but is only part of our training focus," says Newman.

"Training is such a multi-faceted effort at our company that our employees often refer to Redwood University." Redwood's training starts with a six- to eight-hour orientation for every new employee. It covers administrative details to safety to company culture, "our basic value of courtesy and service," says Newman. To ensure both confidence and safety, "not one piece equipment can be used unless you've been trained on it," he adds. Keeping track of such extensive training is done with a "master sheet" for each employee. It notes every training activity each employee has completed.

Even new managers go through "Redwood University," Newman adds. "We don't assume that anyone knows how to run anything. That's not just for safety reasons. We are teaching our company's style,

technique and culture." That includes being "the least offensive" to neighbors and customers when operating noisy equipment such as leaf blowers, a hot issue in the California. "We've gotten a lot of calls about how polite our people are and how much their courtesy is appreciated."

At Bio Green in Ashburn and Manassas, Va., the benefits of training go beyond meeting state regulations. "A training program lets us assess the value

of employees, have a mechanism for constant re-evaluation, builds consumer and customer confidence in our company, expands our market, and gives us a basis for employee raises and promotions," says David Schrader, staff agronomist and sales vice president.

Training is a tricky issue, though, in a company that has about 20 employees in the winter and 60 in spring and summer. "We walk a fine line on how much to invest in training, because we have a huge number of new people every year," adds Schrader.

Bio Green uses a state-mandated two-tier training system for pesticide application, which involves 40 hours of training and a 50-question exam to obtain registration status.

The "initial hump" for Bio Green, Schrader says, is to get people through the testing process to keep enough certified people on staff.

Achieving state registration and certification is an incentive for employees, who receive "an automatic bump in pay" once they pass the test. Bio Green has a formal tracking mechanism: a written list of Route Foreman Skill Levels that break down to four different levels of competency, with progress to each skill level verified by the vice president of production and branch manager.

One of the best training tools in the industry is the ALCA Certification program. "We offer a full two days of training to prepare for the Certified Landscape Technician (CLT) test, and we're finding that we have people taking it simply as a training resource," says Beth W. Palys, CAE, executive director of the Landscape Contractors Association (LCA) of DC-MD-VA, in Rockville, Md. Many larger companies, she says, use certification guidelines as part of their in-house training programs, above and beyond preparation to taking certification tests. That's because "certification is seen as a process that validates landscaping expertise," she said. "It's not an easy test to pass, so doing so means that a person has a technical value to both the company and the industry."

"There is a real need to differentiate between companies and find qualified people. Training and certification are one way to do so." □

—Ruth E. Thaler-Carter is a freelance writer-editor based in Baltimore, Md.



**Tim Aalbu is seeking creative ways to attract, retain workers.**