



Get with the program!

Everyone talks a good game about managing teams, but the few that make it happen share information, responsibility and rewards.

By GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

Teamwork is such an obviously good idea that you may take it for granted. These four companies of different sizes consider teamwork a major article of faith. Here's a look at how they live that philosophy.

Share the news

Chapel Valley Landscape Co. of Woodbine, MD, employs about 250 people and generates revenues of between \$15 million and \$16 million. The family-owned com-

pany provides residential and commercial design/build and maintenance, as well as water management/irrigation and lighting.

Hans Bleinberger, residential manager, describes his company's path to teamwork as a part of an evolutionary process.

"You know that to get anything done, you're going to have to have a lot of people helping you," he says.

Bleinberger is committed to teaming on an exceptionally strong level, starting with communication. "I know that communication is a trite, overused word, but that's what it is — sharing information. We're an open-book company in that we share our financials with our employees at all levels. I take a lot of pride involving the team in developing a sound budget, and then letting *them* come up with a strategy to meet the budget. We keep them up to date on how they're doing and how their strategy is working."

Does this mean if he's thinking about

buying a new chipper, he actually runs that past his team? Yes. "We tell the employees we're looking at a piece of equipment and this is how the purchase would affect our overhead, how it might affect the bottom line. Then we ask, 'What do you think? Do you want to hold tight, or do you want to buy?'" he explains.

The residential division has three teams of about 12 to 15 people each. "I migrate between those teams and tie them together," he says.

Communication methods include:

- ▶ A company newsletter in both English and Spanish
- ▶ E-mail



J. Landon Reeve

cont. on page 50

cont. from page 47

► Phones with combination cell phones/radios that act like walky-talkies

► Weekly meetings (foremen, field managers, design, sales, the ranks).

Chapel Valley also provides ample incentives. "We do branch profit-sharing," Bleinberger says. "All the employees are eligible for a fixed sum each quarter. Since we're open book, we're in a position to say, 'If we put a couple of Saturdays in here, it will get us over the hump and we'll make our number.'"

But does the teamwork approach really work? "We can say without a doubt that it does, evidenced by a couple of things. One is just the stability of our team. It has longevity. And when your folks go on to other opportunities, the team has enough strength to withstand it. We've been able to weather the storms of market ups and downs, of competition, fairly well. I think teamwork is our strength. It's what has allowed us to grow and to do so in a controlled manner."

He continues, "Customer satisfaction and perception also benefit. A customer looks out and sees everybody working hard, the foreman and the crew doing their thing, they have a system down, the tarps are coming off the truck, the tools are out ... it clearly looks like teamwork in motion. I think the customer extrapolates that out to the quality of the job they are going to get and the value they paid for."

Interestingly, when *Landscape Management* phoned Chapel Valley for an interview, we discovered a teaming attitude right off the bat. We asked owner-president J. Landon Reeve to speak with us, and he promptly recommended we speak with Bleinberger: "Hans is very passionate about the subject." Informed of the hand-off, Bleinberger responded, "That's Landon. He gives the credit and is very comfortable stepping out of the spotlight for other members of the team."

Make TQM work for your services

Teamwork is both an everyday common-sense idea and a major element in Total Quality Management, today's leading management philosophy worldwide.

TQM is the source of such buzzwords as quality circles, self-managing work groups and participative management. While such language can sound like mere jargon, it can make a huge difference to business success — if you apply it.

Tim Doppel of Atwood LawnCare did. He heard one of the last public lectures of W. Edwards Deming, the legendary founder of TQM, in Detroit half a decade ago. Doppel reports that although TQM leans strongly toward manufacturing, with some effort on his part, he was able to apply the thinking to his service business.

Of course, TQM is nothing new and many related ideas continue to evolve. For example, Doppel says that he picked up much of his teaming philosophy from non-TQM sources, including discussions with green industry colleagues. But if you care to go to the sources, here are some books:

The Total Quality Management Handbook by John L. Hradesky, December 1994. About \$75; 712 pages. McGraw Hill Text; ISBN: 0070305110. This is an exhaustive (and possibly exhausting) text with substantial treatment of leadership and team building.

The Quality Improvement Handbook: Team Guide to Tools and Techniques by Roger C. Swanson, March 1995. About \$50; 267 pages. Saint Lucie Press; ISBN: 188401559X. This book attempts to apply TQM ideas both to manufacturing and service businesses, and also serves as a sourcebook for tools supporting a team-based quality improvement effort.

The Man Who Discovered Quality: How W. Edwards Deming Brought the Quality Revolution to America — The Stories of Ford, Xerox, and GM by Andrea Gabor, Paperback Reprint edition February 1992. About \$14. Penguin USA; ISBN: 0140165282. This is a popular book about the founder of TQM and his thinking.

Share the rewards

The approximately 200 employees at L&L Landscape Services Inc., now a Tru-Green LandCare firm in Sunnyvale, CA, serve industrial and commercial clients in the counties surrounding San Francisco Bay. L&L's net revenues are between \$11 million and \$12 million.

How did partners Steve Glover and Rob Zolezzi get into the teamwork mode? Glover explains, "While teamwork is part of my nature, the actual process of making it happen was spurred on by going to association sessions, hearing the message reinforced and seeing how to build a good team."

Finding the right people is the key, Glover says. "The most important part is finding team members who are complementary to each other and to the vision of

the group. More important than the technical skills of the team members is the ability of those team members to support and contribute to the relationship."

Once L&L has people in place, it uses incentives to reinforce the philosophy. "Once they are a team, we give them a motivation to work well as a team. But we do it in that order. If you take people who are incompatible, it's not going to be very productive no matter how much you incentivize them," he says.

L&L's day-to-day teams include:

► The executive team (comprised of Glover, Zolezzi, the CFO, the vice president of operations and the director of sales — they share incentives with themselves and within their departments)

cont. on page 52



our corporate philosophy, on how to run the business and how to approach customers. And I share with them how we did last year."

Doppel describes himself as "a very hands-off manager." As a consequence, he tries to hire and retain employees who can handle things themselves. For example, he treats each of his technicians as a kind of independent route manager. They have their own geographic areas and they're responsible for getting the work done and building those areas. "As long as the numbers are

cont. from page 50

► Each department is organized as a team

► The ultimate team: production crews; "If they work well together, they are rewarded, which reinforces a team spirit."

Glover can measure the success of the teaming philosophy at L&L. "Since we put our executive team in place a few years ago, our revenues and profits have increased substantially."

Share the responsibility

Atwood LawnCare is a \$1.25-million company in Sterling Heights, MI. Its 18 employees serve approximately 5,000 single-family residential customers in Detroit's northeast suburbs, says owner/president Tim Doppel. Although his firm is small, it won the 1996 Environmental Improvement Award from the Professional Lawn Care Association of America.

"I've always believed in giving my employees as much rope as they can possibly use without hanging themselves," says Doppel.

"Right from the get-go, I tried to involve my people as much as possible in de-

cision making by giving them enough rein to do what I feel they know how to do."

Exactly what does that mean at Atwood? "I make sure that I inform my workers about what is going on with the business side of the company. For example, they know about the replacement plan for vehicles; they



Tim Doppel

know about the needs for office equipment; they know on a percentage basis how we're doing with sales and production," he explains.

This communication takes place informally, he says. "We're small enough I can do a tailgate thing, pull everybody together and say, 'I want you guys to know what's going on with this.' Each February, we actually go off-site to a conference room at a local hotel and spend a day just getting everybody on the same page. We talk about

good and going in the direction they're supposed to, I'll stay out of their way," he adds.

Interestingly, Doppel reports that not everybody is comfortable with this style of management. "Everybody's a self-starter when you interview them," he says. "But it becomes obvious very quickly whether or not it's true, and whether they're going to survive under the current system."

Share the burden

OneSource is a national service corporation, headquartered in Atlanta. Ronald Schmoyer serves as president of OneSource Landscape and Golf Services, the company's landscaping division (other divisions offer janitorial, HVAC, energy, pest control and staffing services). His division works from Pennsylvania to Florida, has revenues of \$45.5 million and 1,200 employees at peak season.

"This is not an individual sport," Schmoyer says when asked about teamwork. "In this business, we're only going to win as team players."

But how does he do it? "One of our biggest thrusts in 1999 is to develop a team

cont. on page 54

cont. from page 52

approach with our sister corporation in the janitorial arena, to do cross-marketing of our customer bases," Schmoyer responds. "For that to work, we have to establish some good teamwork with our counterparts in other parts of the company."

And internally within his division?

"One of the things that has made us so successful is our structure," he continues. "Our district managers are responsible for the operation in a particular area. The structure promotes the entrepreneurial spirit — we really want the district managers to operate as if it's their own business and to develop their own team players."

"We want them to be making most of the decisions, but we also like to be the mentor to help them develop further. If one of them is working on an unusually large project, that's when I'd like them to raise their hand and say, 'We could use some assistance.' That's a team player. And then we'll help them."

Schmoyer's district managers share in the rewards in entrepreneurial fashion. "Over the last four years, we initiated incentive programs and we've been tweaking them as they go along. The district managers receive a fairly sizable bonus on a

Strong teams = retention made easy

One of the best benefits of teaming is in recruiting, hiring and employee retention. All three of our featured landscape companies report good results:

▶ **Steve Glover of L&L Landscape Services Inc.:**

"I think teaming makes it easier to recruit and hire. Our people go out and tell their friends and relatives about us. We don't have a problem at that level. And we have a very low turnover rate. If you were to compare our employee retention with comparable companies, we'd do very well."

▶ **Hans Bleinberger of Chapel Valley Landscape:**

"We find that recruiting and hiring are easier because of teamwork. One of the things we do as a company is recruiting incentives. We let the team know when we need a crewman or a foreman. Somebody will say, 'I've got a friend just getting out of college who's looking for a position.' If we hire the friend and he stays with us for 90 days, the employee who made the recommendation gets a financial reward. We also have really good stability with the team — we don't see much turnover."

▶ **Ron Schmoyer of OneSource:**

"We've never had a problem on a management level. But just like a fast food chain or a resort, we find that labor is a challenge. That's why we instituted some incentives. There's a sign-on bonus for new hourly employees and also a bonus for an employee who brings someone in (if that person stays for three months, the employee can make \$350)."

quarterly basis. We're weighting it 60% on total revenue, 20% on new growth and then 20% what we call 'operating contribution,' which in some organizations would be called net profit."

OneSource teams coordinate through:

▶ Monthly senior management team (vice presidents, controller and human resources person) meetings

▶ Weekly conference calls with all district managers, followed by separate staff meetings with all district-level employees

▶ Semi-annual management meetings

Signs that the teamwork approach is succeeding include:

▶ Annual revenue has grown from about \$23 million to \$45.5 million in five years

▶ OneSource's parent organization in Atlanta is adopting the landscape/golf division's teaming tactics. **LM**

—The author is a freelance writer and frequent contributor based in Mendham, NJ.



Successful companies make sure that front-line employees are part of the decision-making process. They can offer vital information about the products they use . . . and customers.