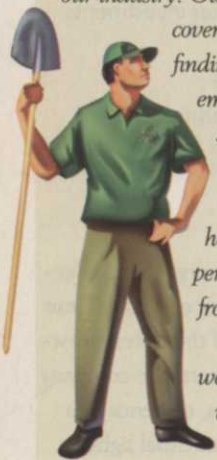


# The supervisors' tale

*Editor's note: Whether you like it or not, the labor crunch is here to stay in our industry. Our two previous issues covered many aspects of finding and keeping good employees, and future issues will continue the coverage. This month's story shows how to grow good supervisors and managers from within.*

*Your experiences are welcome, too. Contact us at 440/891-2729.*



**EI has a tradition of growing from within. Here, Arman, Johnson and Lopez meet.**



## These employees were developed into managers from within the company. Your employees may have similar potential

**E**nvironmental Industries Inc., Calabasas, CA, is the largest privately owned landscape contracting firm in the United States, with a reputation for developing its own people into supervisors and managers. We asked Bill Arman, vice president for human resources to talk to a few.

**Arman:** One who comes to mind is Raul Lopez at the Orange County office. I recommend him because he has moved from being an absolute non-English speaking entry-level worker from Mexico to an account manager. He is responsible for over \$1 million worth of revenue and deals directly with the customer, writes budgets, negotiates contracts, handles quality control... the whole management trip. He's a kind of hero here.

**LM:** Is it okay if we interview him?

**Arman:** If you can reach him. He's the kind who answers the phone at 6 a.m. before going out to the field.

### Raul Lopez' story

**LM:** You've come a long way with this company, then?

**Lopez:** Pretty much. I started in November of 1980. I came in as a laborer, pulling weeds. This year I passed the 19-year mark.

**LM:** We understand that at the time you started, there were some skills you needed to develop.

**Lopez (laughs):** I didn't even have a driver's license!

**LM:** And now you are an account manager with over \$1 million in accounts?

**Lopez:** Correct.

**LM:** Clearly, something good happened. Did the company help you get this far?

**Lopez:** Pretty much. They helped get whatever I was lacking, like the driving thing. At that time Rob Johnson, the branch manager in this office, was the senior foreman and saw something in me. He felt he could develop me into something. He took me under his wing and taught me how to drive and do all the things I didn't know how to do.

**LM:** You went on to become a foreman yourself?

**Lopez:** Yes, I did. After two years.

**LM:** You must have gone to some schools.

**Lopez:** I went to seminars here in the company, but I never took outside courses. The only thing I went to an outside school for was to improve my English.

**LM:** You did well, because your English is excellent!

**Lopez:** Thank you.



**LM:** How did you get to be an account manager? That's a big step.

**Lopez:** My strength was getting things done on time, so I kept developing that and making money on the jobs in my area, and the company saw me doing that. They figured if I could improve my skills for communicating with clients, they would have somebody who could be an account manager. And they helped me a lot in that, especially Bill (Arman) and Rob.

**LM:** So the company encouraged you?

**Lopez:** Right. They gave me what I wanted in terms of what I could do. When I said, "I want to go and try this or that," they never said no.

**LM:** Would you like to go higher?

**Lopez:** If there is an opportunity, I don't see why not. If you never try, you never know how high you're going to go.

#### **Rob Johnson's story**

(Rob is vice president of operation, Orange County branch of EII)

**LM:** You spotted and developed Raul from within and now he's an account manager.

**Johnson:** You bet. At the time I met him, I was an area supervisor and Raul was a laborer who came from Mexico, didn't have a driver's license and didn't speak English that well. But he showed me a little spark, a little initiative, and that he's a smart person.

**LM:** What specifically did he show you?

**Johnson:** He was well groomed, not sloppy... he would look me in the eye and we would be able to have a good conversation. The work he did was very good. And he could direct other people. I could see that he had leadership skills.

**LM:** What did you do to encourage and help him along?

**Johnson:** Raul was able to grab onto things fairly fast, and because of that I was able to give him more responsibilities. As that progressed, we started planning out different things to train him on. Raul was doing simple gardening activities and I elevated his work to other things such as using chemicals or irrigation repair. We have some generic activities that a crew leader needs to be able to accomplish, so we set up Raul in the training programs for that. He became a full-fledged crew leader from there.

**LM:** We hear you even helped him get his driver's license.

**Johnson:** I actually went with him and showed him how to drive. When he got his learner's permit, we went to an area that wasn't highly populated, and he drove around there. When he was comfortable, I went on the freeway with him – and that

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was a lot of fun (laughs). Once he had his license, a whole new set of opportunities opened up for him, as well as for me. He could now be a crew leader. It became clear that he had the skills to direct more than one crew. We gave him another person with another truck and built from there — he planned the activities for those people, writing down things for them to do.  
**LM:** What about the language issue?

**Johnson:** He could communicate his thoughts on a project in writing — things we would want the client to know. His English wasn't good, so we rewrote his letters into the correspondence with the customers. After he went to some classes, his English improved greatly and Raul responded again. This was one of the main steps he took to becoming an account manager. He developed his English so that

he can now communicate with our customers with clarity and present himself very well to them. They can see that he has a passion and a concern for their landscape.

**LM:** This is a great story, and among other things it paints a picture of you as a very good mentor. How did you develop mentoring skills?

**Johnson:** Environmental takes mentoring seriously. We use a mentoring consulting firm for management development and training. We do a sophisticated course with them on mentoring and developing subordinates. Their ideas on mentoring are now second nature to me.

#### **Robertson Lawn Care**

At the other end of the scale, Robertson Lawn Care, Springfield, IL, has a seasonal maximum workforce of no more than eight employees. Nonetheless, it has a

tremendous record of annual business growth — achieved without expanding the workforce. President Jack Robertson attributes a big part of that success to his two senior service managers, Brian Cox (20 years with the company) and Mike Harris (19 years).

We asked for a chance to speak with the two supervisors directly, and Robertson readily agreed.



Jack Robertson and his two supervisors, Mike Harris and Brian Cox, share more than work.

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### Brian Cox's story

**LM:** Obviously, something must have kept you at the company for 20 years! What can a contractor do to hold people and develop them into long-term supervisors?

**Cox:** First, find somebody who has a definite interest in the business. I do. I have a degree in agronomy from Western Illinois University, so I came into the industry with some interest and background. And spending 20 years in the business has paid off. I now teach turf management at the local junior college here in town.

I really enjoy doing that, and it's probably our biggest route to finding people who are interested in the industry. We've had some success stories from the students I've had in my class. We think a future supervisor or two might come out of that. I'm introduced to a whole new sector of people that way...and they have friends too.

**LM:** Why did you stay at Robertson when you could have gone elsewhere?

**Cox:** Working conditions. I had a burning desire to get into this type of industry. You really can't prevent people from leaving, and we've had that happen, too. We're still good friends with those folks. But if you keep people happy, and they like what they're doing and get paid a competitive wage, the chances of retaining them are a lot greater. That tells you why I'm still here. You can actually form a working relationship and a friendship over the course of the years. And friends will try not to disappoint and let you down.

### Mike Harris' story

**LM:** Your company must do something right because both of you have been there so long. That's staggering by today's standards.

**Harris:** Yes, it is. This is my 19<sup>th</sup> year.

**LM:** What explains that?

**Harris:** It's just enjoyable to come to work here.

**LM:** And what would you advise a contractor to do to develop – and keep – a supervisor like yourself?

**Harris:** Give people a job that they will enjoy doing. Don't force people to work long hours, which I know other companies do. The hours are good here. We don't have a large dollar quota to fill each day. And we get along really well. As I said, it's enjoyable to come to work here.

Later, we returned to Robertson:

**LM:** Your supervisors revealed your secret – they enjoy coming to work!

**Robertson (laughs):** Imagine that – what a concept!

— The author is a contributing editor based in Mendham, NJ.

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