



## Sustainability's truest meaning

**W**hat does sustainability mean for us? Perhaps you're wondering that in light of the growing popularity, use and misuse of the word within our society and within our industry.

We can start with the obvious, of course. We can tick off a list of environmentally friendly landscape practices — providing our customers' properties with the right plants in the right places, irrigating efficiently, not bagging grass clipping and so forth. That's just part of being sustainable. Its meaning also includes the survival, health and growth of our companies, and ultimately our industry.

Sustainability means combining environmental with business best practices, the two being different sides of the same coin. Let's not confine our understanding of the term sustainability exclusively to what's "green."

Here are some time-tested strategies for building sustainability into our companies. Think expansively.

- ▶ Have a kickoff meeting with those you're counting on to help define your company's new sustainable initiatives. You need a clear understanding of what they mean to you before you begin your journey. In addition to focusing on environmental services you might build into your company or add as services, consider programs to increase the well-being and skills of your team. This will increase the value of your company and its services.

- ▶ The owner and key managers must embrace sustainable goals as a genuine business opportunities

rather than as a public relations. Employees (and customers) will not buy into any program that they perceive to be insincere or half-hearted.

- ▶ Set realistic goals. Incorporate one new green or sustainable component into your company at a time. Start with the easiest changes that will deliver the most immediate results. Rather than installing solar panels, which may have a long or uncertain return on investment (ROI), start by replacing energy-leaking windows and doors. Rather than switching your fleet to biofuels, in light of their fluctuating price, consider a fleet "no-idling" rule, explaining to your employees what it means in terms of fuel cost savings. On the people side, strengthen your company's employee training or institute wellness or smoking cessation programs.

- ▶ Find champions to lead, monitor and measure your company's efforts. Align these new duties with their business and compensation objectives.

- ▶ Share what's working and what's not working with your team — why your first initiatives should return quick, measurable wins. Sharing the results of these first successes will build support and enthusiasm within your company to meet bigger future goals.

- ▶ Fold each new innovation as seamlessly as you can into your company's operations. Every change should offer business, environmental or customer benefits, and not just "feel-good" benefits. Each effort should offer returns comparable to those achievable through other business-critical enterprises if you want it to provide a positive effect on your operation.

It might seem that I've given short shrift to environmental considerations, or what most of us would consider the "green" aspects of sustainability. But if you run a truly professional Green Industry service shop you should already be using horticultural best practices; you're already preserving and enhancing your clients' outdoor environments.

That's what being a true pro in this industry means, after all.

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