

REPORTERS OFTEN ask business owners, “What’s your company’s greatest asset?” The almost-universal refrain: “my people.”

Whether all business owners actually believe that or not, usually there are a few employees at every company who deserve such special recognition — all-star employees who outwork, outsell and/or outperform most others in the company (and sometimes most others in the industry). It’s not necessarily that the other teammates aren’t meeting or even exceeding expectations. It’s just that one guy, or a small group of employees, does it better, faster — almost every time.

“Many people can give the impression they are stellar for a short period of time, but in my eyes the term ‘stellar employee’ is reserved for a co-worker who is extremely reliable and dedicated, and can manage and work well with others over a *sustained* period of time,” says Steven Jomides, owner of Lawns by Yorkshire, based in Westwood, NJ.

Whether it’s sheer luck or a company culture that allows individuals to excel, *continued on page 8*



CARROTS

Landscapers and a consultant share tips to recognizing, rewarding, retaining and fully leveraging your all-star players.

BY **DANIEL G. JACOBS** MANAGING EDITOR



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when business owners find star employees, the top challenges are how best to reward them without making others jealous, preventing competitors from poaching them and figuring out a way to clone them.

Recruiting & retaining winners

There are countless books and strategies touting foolproof solutions to hiring quality employees. And while technology might help weed out the misfits, anyone can look good on paper or online. In many cases, you really don't know what you have until you've made the hire.

"Regardless of the interview process and all of that pre-work stuff, we don't know until we get them out in the field, whether they have the aptitude or the will or any of that other stuff," says David Weekley, master pond builder and owner of WaterScapes Pro, Charlotte, NC. "Usually, we can tell in the first three or four days if they have what we're looking for."

It often takes several swings to get a hit. In the past five years, Weekley has hired between 30 and 50 people to fill his three-person staff.

"It's not tangible at all. It's about observation," Weekley says. "The formula I'm looking at is not written down. The trait I found that fits well in our organization is a dedication to really learning the craft. We're artists, when it comes right



"YOU CANNOT TRAIN THEIR GENUINE INTEREST TO LEARN AND GOOD ATTITUDE."

— David Weekley, Waterscapes Pro

career opportunities arise," Wilson says. "And, of course, you should pay them at the high end of the pay scale for those positions.

"Employees also respond really well to public

recognition," he continues. "Recognize them in front of others: Highlight what they're doing so well; call attention to them in a positive way."

Jomides says a few well-timed, carefully chosen words serve as great motivators.

"Praise and acknowledgement go a long way — along with an occasional lunch and maybe even a company-paid trip to the annual Green Industry Conference," Jomides says.

Such perks and public pats on the back are a great way to recognize workers who consistently go above and beyond their job descriptions. But remember: Hard work affects more than just your company.

"A lot of all-stars put in major overtime," Wilson says. "They are away from home a lot. If you give them something they can share with their spouses and children, the entire family will appreciate your company more."

It's the "happy wife, happy life" approach to managing.

"It's buying them lunch," Weekley says. "It's offering to do things outside of the work that can help them. Anything they want to do to improve their lot, I am in favor of, whether it's education or supporting an outside interest. If they're happy at home and overall, then they're certainly going to be happier at work."

It's not all about the green.

"Retention is not all about money," Jomides says.

"People want to be part of a team and know there is a future for them. Encourage co-workers to get involved

and listen to what they have to say. When possible, promote from within and encourage and communicate a succession plan for your staff."

Risk versus reward

Few argue rewarding stellar work is a problem. But there can be a downside. The challenge rears its head when those who don't receive the recognition become jealous.

"If it's not part of a prescribed benefits plan, other employees might find out about it and think it's favoritism," Wilson says. "You have to be careful."

You also need to consider Uncle Sam's take — literally. Such employee rewards might be taxable to the employee.

"If you don't put it on their W-2s (tax forms) at the end of the year, and you are audited, you could face a tax penalty,"

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"RETENTION IS NOT ALL ABOUT MONEY."

— Steven Jomides, Lawns By Yorkshire

down to it. Any characteristics of a great artist are the kinds of things we're looking for — not just the creative side, but also the ability to work with a team."

The atmosphere you create has a lot to do with finding and developing all-stars. When he ran his own Green Industry company, Bruce Wilson sought to promote from within.

"We had a culture of train your replacement," says Wilson, now with the Wilson-Oyler Group consultancy and a *Landscape Management* columnist. "To move up, people had to train their replacements — so they would focus on coaching the better employees and encouraging them to step up."

Celebrating the best

It never hurts to offer all-stars fatter paychecks, but it's not the only way to win — and keep — their attention, hearts and talents.

"You should offer your all-stars promotions when the

COVER STORY

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Wilson warns. "One thing about the government: They don't miss many opportunities to shove their hands in your pocket."

Rewards can have a positive effect on other workers, encouraging them to work harder, but there is one key caveat.

"Co-workers will learn to respect the stellar people in the organization," Jomides says. "Resentment comes when someone is granted stellar status who has not earned it."

Nature & nurture

How many business owners have fantasized about cloning their best employees and creating a staff of super sales reps, fantastic foremen and wonderful workers? The general consensus seems to be that while exceptional talent is a gift from God, whatever abilities exist in a person can be enhanced.

"The part of it you cannot train is their genuine interest to learn and good attitude," Weekley says. "You can't instill that. That comes from inside."

Some gifts come from above, and others from the home. "Family upbringing has a lot to do with this," adds Jomides.

Wherever it comes from, talents can be honed.

"If they have a great attitude and want to learn, then the rest of it you can build — whether it's loyalty to the company or production quality," Weekley says. **LM**

LOSING YOUR BEST SALES REP

One way to reward your best salesperson is to make him or her a manager. But what if that person is lousy with working with subordinates.

"This happens in a lot of companies with sales forces," Wilson says. "They have a really good salesperson and make him a sales manager. They lose their best sales person and promote a person who doesn't know how to manage people. That's very, very common. The challenge with that is your best sales person could get de-motivated if you pick somebody else to be the sales manager."

Weekley says it's worth the risk. "You'll never know if they can manage unless you give them a shot," he adds. "To not take the risk is to be satisfied with the status quo, which is fine if that is the track you're on." — DJ



Good workers aren't always good managers.

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