

Industry insiders say its 'grow or go' time for slouches and grouches — employees who under perform or have bad attitudes.

BY **MARTY WHITFORD**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

# AND STICKS

THEY CALLED him “toothless Frank.” He didn’t smile much — for obvious reasons. He was a perennial under performer with a national lawn care company. He didn’t seem to care what management wanted him to do. But one day, Frank’s manager sat down with him and said, “We’re having difficulty getting you productive. We’ve tried almost everything. What’s it gonna take?”

“Teeth,” Frank replied.

And according to Bill Hoopes, president of Delaware, OH-based Grass Roots Training & Consulting, that’s exactly what they gave him — new teeth and a new outlook on himself

and his employer.

“Frank turned on a dime,” Hoopes says. “Overnight, he became one of the company’s most productive and loyal employees.”

The lawn care company didn’t even have to pay for Frank’s new bridge and other dental work. One of its managers simply asked his dentist to give Frank an extreme mouth makeover and accept an affordable, monthly payment plan for the work.

“For every turnaround story like Frank’s, there are nine others with unhappy endings,” notes Hoopes, who served as director of training for Barefoot Grass *continued on page 12*

## COVER STORY

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and Scotts Lawn Service before founding his consultancy. “But if we work harder to find and deliver what matters most to each one of our employees — when it makes sense — then maybe we can find and keep more good people.”

Show your employees you listen and truly care, and many (not necessarily most) will listen more closely and care more, in return. But sources say motivating a sluggish and/or grumpy employee to revolutionize his thinking and behavior is a team responsibility shared by all who touch that individual — the hiring manager, direct supervisor, training director and business owner — as well as, of course, the marginal man himself.

### Hard look in the mirror

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, a certain company held a three-day, off-site management meeting. When the meeting moderator asked



## “MOST PEOPLE PROBLEMS BEGIN AT THE VERY BEGINNING”

— **Bill Hoopes**, Grassroots Training

each manager to openly share his or her Achilles’ heel with the group, one of the enlightened actually proclaimed, “My biggest weakness is my people.”

Sadly, Hoopes and other industry insiders say this manager is far from alone in playing the blame game. Many Green Industry managers need to take a hard look in the mirror. Perhaps then they’ll see their biggest weakness is hiring, developing, motivating, rewarding and retaining good people.

“The single-biggest hindrance to developing productive teams is poor hiring — or, as they say in the tech world, ‘garbage in, garbage out,’” Hoopes notes. “Most people problems begin at the very beginning.”

Hoopes says most landscape and

lawn care companies have poor recruiting programs, if they have them at all.

Many fail to leverage popular social media, such

as LinkedIn and Facebook, or even key virtual job boards including, among many others, [HortJobs.com](http://HortJobs.com), [CareerBuilder.com](http://CareerBuilder.com), [Monster.com](http://Monster.com) and [Craigslis.com](http://Craigslis.com).

“Without cutting-edge recruiting tools, we’ll never attract the best of the best,” Hoopes says.

Landscapers also must improve their people interviewing and selection techniques. They also need to regularly sharpen their people’s skill sets and job performance with mandated, formalized training and daily coaching, Hoopes says.

“Too many Green Industry businesses treat their people like any other resource — like a tire on a truck — when, in fact, people are *the* resource,” Hoopes adds.

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**Addition by subtraction**

No doubt, the mirror reflects plenty of growth opportunity for hirers. But many times an employee is an under performer and/or has a bad attitude and is incorrigible. Hoopes and landscapers say slouches and grouches must not be tolerated.

“In these cases, you have to do something — and, for the record, doing nothing doesn’t qualify as ‘something,’” Hoopes says. “I work fast, using a three-strike system. It’s ‘grow or go’ time. People are too important to settle for less. We owe it to them, ourselves, and our companies and customers, to help these people reach higher ground fast.

“Be careful not to waste time trying to save a dead duck,” he warns. “Build a people culture to avoid the problem in the first place.”

Sometimes, cuts equal gains. Last summer, for example, Burlington, MA-based Mac’s Landscaping laid off seven of its 22 employees and individual productivity rose 25%.

“We cut four for under performing and three others for having bad attitudes — they weren’t team players and wouldn’t change,” says President Gerry “Mac” McCarthy. “Our 2009 sales were down 15% because of the recession, but we did the work with 33% less people.”

At age 55, McCarthy has ridden out a few economic storms: “1975 and ’89 were bad, but this, by far, is the toughest, longest-lasting recession I’ve endured — and I don’t see it ending until 2011.”

McCarthy’s two sons, Keith and Shawn, work for the business and

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**4 PEOPLE PRINCIPLES**

**According to Bill Hoopes, president of Delaware, OH-based Grass Roots Training & Consulting, the cornerstones to maximizing individual productivity and minimizing people problems are:**

1. Recognize that individual productivity begins with the hiring decision.
2. Reasonable expectations and procedures must be set, understood and accepted by all.
3. Realize initial socialization, training and transition to routine — transition from the warm-and-fuzzy training room to the often cold, wet and harsh real world — will have an impact on future productivity.
4. Team and individual activity (what you are doing) and performance (how you are doing it) must be tracked, and coupled with appropriate daily coaching responses. — MW

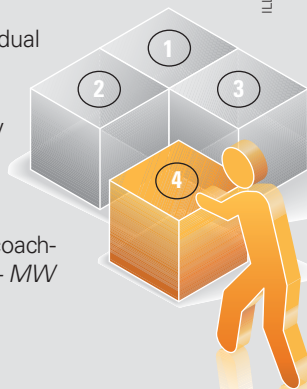


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## “LESS THAN 10% OF SLOUCHES AND GROUCHES CAN BE TURNED AROUND”

— Kurt Kluznik, Yardmaster

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nudged Dad to part ways with “the strays and BAs” (bad attitudes).

“For 35 years I’ve been Mr. Nice Guy. I give employees first, second, third — you name it — chances,” McCarthy says. “But in this economy, there’s zero room for weak people — or those who employ them.”

### Grow or go

“Less than 10% of employees who are slouches or grouches can be turned around,” says Kurt Kluznik, president

of Painesville, OH-based Yardmaster.

Kluznik should know: He’s attempted plenty of people makeovers since launching his now-300-employee, four-branch business 38 years ago.

“Of the select few I’ve seen do an about-face, many didn’t do so until they were working for themselves,” Kluznik notes. “I used to ask myself, ‘Why couldn’t we harness that?’ But I don’t any more. I now know the ‘it’ wasn’t there to harness — not then, not for us.”

On the people side of the green busi-

ness, little stays the same, Kluznik says.

“One of our branch managers was a real all-star, but fell far and hard,” he adds. “The guy was a solid hire and a well-liked manager for years. But, as it turns out, part of why he was so well liked was he would let his people take shortcuts and would clean up after them. It got to the point where even our best guys were taking advantage of him. He learned a hard lesson on the difference between being liked and being respected. A good manager earns both.”

A smart manager also knows how one individual, no matter his or her position, can sway the energy of an entire organization, Hoopes adds.

“I recently witnessed a CSR (customer service representative) take down an entire office with her infectious bad attitude,” Hoopes shares. “I wish I could say that ugly scenario is the exception, but I’d be lying through my teeth.” LM

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