

# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Letting an employee problem fester brought Landscape America's owners to the boiling point. Today, they address employee issues head-on.



**COMPANY:** Landscape America, Inc.

**PRESIDENT:** Doug McDuff

**HEADQUARTERS:** Wrentham, MA

**FOUNDED:** 2006

**EMPLOYEES:** 15

**SERVICE MIX:** 30% maintenance; 60% design/build; 10% snow

**CLIENT MIX:** 70% residential; 30% commercial

**2010 REVENUE:** \$1.2 million

**WEB:** [www.landscapeamericainc.com](http://www.landscapeamericainc.com)

**BEST ADVICE:** Everyone has different motivation factors. Find out what drives your employees and what they want to achieve. We want employees who are motivated to move up and to grow with the company.

**O**NE DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEE can easily cause problems that

spread through the entire company. It's something that needs to be stopped in its tracks. But Doug McDuff, president of Landscape America, Inc., in Wrentham, MA, says he didn't realize this soon enough and a problem with an employee grew much larger than it had to be.

The problem stemmed from an employee who was a friend and had been with the company from its start. The fact that he was a friend made it a little difficult to address complaints, so the concerns went unhandled for quite some time. "Things started out well, but over time the employee became negative and was making other employees negative as well," says McDuff. "It was mostly just a bad attitude but it became like a cancer within the company."

Each day, a negative tone would be set the minute the employee showed up for work. "He was always in a bad mood and difficult to communicate with," says McDuff. "His performance was never really an issue and in that aspect he was a good, well-rounded employee who we relied on. He knew how to do whatever we needed him to do and we could send him out

and trust he would handle things well. The problem all came back to his attitude around the office."

With the negativity mounting and other employees starting to complain, it came to the point where McDuff thought he'd have to fire the employee. But when he sat down to have that hard talk, he realized the sit-down itself should have happened a long time ago. "We flat-out told him he had been showing up to work with a bad attitude and we couldn't have that anymore," remembers McDuff. "But then he started telling us why. He thought by this point with the company he'd be at a management level. So we talked it over and came up with some goals for him to hit."

When McDuff realized this employee wanted more responsibility, he found ways to give him just that. "We started doing a weekly meeting and had him facilitate some of those meetings," says McDuff. "Getting up in front of the group gives him a little bit of local fame. One of his strong points is speaking about plant material and now the employees go to him if they have questions. That's been a big motivator. Using key employees' names more when talking about the functions of the business allows them to feel

important and also lets the younger guys look up to them and gives them some motivation of their own to get to the next level."

Today, things have improved all around. McDuff says failing to sit down with the employee earlier was a mistake on his part, and many of the issues could have been avoided. "I learned I need to communicate better when I have an issue with an employee," he says. "The fact that this employee was not communicating with me was my fault, too, and I should have sat him down sooner. My advice to other business owners is not to let problems go until they reach the boiling point."

In addition, McDuff also set up a peer review system that helps address employee problems head-on. "Every year we send each of our employees a peer review form and ask them to fill one out for other team members in our business," he explains. "Every employee gets back three forms that other employees have filled out about them, and we sit down and go through all the comments. The employee never knows who wrote it. From there, we set our goals for the next year for each employee. They have been great for communication and have really helped address concerns. This is also a chance to share positive employee performance comments, which is important for motivation."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.