

MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Losing a key employee led the managers of this company to focus more on appreciating their people.



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COMPANY: Ruppert Landscape

HEADQUARTERS:
Laytonsville, MD

YEAR FOUNDED: 1976

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 650

2010 REVENUE: \$65,339,000

PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:
\$67,000,000

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:
49% landscape maintenance;
51% landscape construction

CLIENT BREAKDOWN:
100% commercial

I TOOK LOSING a key employee for Chris Davitt, president of Maryland-based

Ruppert Landscape, to realize his company needed to redefine itself as one that really cares about its employees. It was tough losing a valuable employee, and the situation was made worse because he took business with him. Davitt says that experience led to his company developing a much better appreciation for its people, and that's been a positive change.

This particular employee was managing the landscape management segment, which was a key growing division at the time. When the employee sat down for his annual pay review, he asked for more money and was turned down.

"Back then it wasn't really a formal process," recalls Davitt. "It wasn't an evaluation — it was more of a conversation. This employee argued for more pay and we argued for less, and we knew he wasn't happy but the meeting came to an end. We chalked it up as 'we're supposed to have these kinds of uncomfortable moments where we save cost and employees aren't always happy.' It was part of doing business."

But within a couple of weeks the employee left — and took about one-third of Ruppert's total projects

with him. Davitt says that got his attention, and he realized he needed to make some changes. He needed to make his employees' wants and needs heard and make his staff a higher priority. Today, Davitt says his people are his number one asset.

"Happy employees work harder and by making a real investment in your employees on a variety of levels...it strengthens their commitment to the organization and its values," Davitt says.

Davitt says he created a structure around the goal of trying to become a more employee-oriented company. With 15 branches on the East Coast, this structure helps ensure employees at all locations are feeling appreciated.

That has included the requirement that each branch host an employee barbecue or gathering for a meal at least three times a year. "These get-togethers are reminders to say 'thank you,'" Davitt says.

And instead of the informal pay review sessions the company used to hold, management now conducts regular evaluations.

"The employee gets evaluated as well as the manager," says Davitt. "And on top of that we have summer picnics and holiday parties. We have informal celebrations for winning jobs. And we

recognize everyone with birthday cards, and on the anniversary of their hire date (we) give them a commemorative coin/case with signatures and personal messages from all of the company's managers."

When people have landmark anniversaries at Ruppert, the company takes it one step further.

"Maybe it's management in a limo showing up on the job and picking up the employee," Davitt says. "Then we'll drive them around and do a walk-through history of the jobs they've performed throughout their time with the company, culminating with dinner at a restaurant with their spouse and children to celebrate."

Davitt says that as a large company it's easy to get busy, but he's now truly committed to being good to his people and focusing on being employee-oriented.

"We know from past experience that we might forget, so we have the structure in place to make sure we remember to do these things," he says. "It's all about opportunities to communicate, connect and to say 'thank you.' We think all this takes time, energy and money but it more than pays us back. I go back to the first mistake early in the going that frankly almost sunk the company. That experience really knocked some sense into us and helped us head in the right direction."

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