



BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@questex.com.

Enable crews to be efficient

In recent years, many Green Industry companies have changed the way they manage accounts and supervise crews. Today, the role of account manager often involves managing customer relationships and selling enhancements. Some account managers also are charged with selling new contract work. Given account managers' busy schedules, the role of their production managers is becoming increasingly important.

Production managers can be most beneficial to account managers by doing what their title implies -- managing production. But in some cases, production managers are no more than assistants to account managers — and basically fight fires.

The position needs to be clearly defined. Otherwise, it only adds to the cost of managing crews and customers without any return on investment. To ensure the production manager position pays for itself, consider the following:

1. The production management side of the business should have targeted goals for lowering cost and increasing gross margins on work.
2. Your company must develop best practices or procedures for working efficiently. Your production managers must then buy into those practices and ensure that crews comply with them in the field.
3. Production managers should be taught to observe their crews in the field so they can identify and correct time-wasting methods their workers use.
4. Production managers should work directly alongside their crews — showing them the right way to do things.
5. Production managers should be trained in managing production. In too many cases, companies take a talented foreman and make him or her a production manager, assuming it will go well. And you know what they say about assumptions.

6. The crews themselves need to be measured for performance, and for delivering the quality work you desire within target hour ranges.

It is an oversimplification to state that unless production managers can save enough in labor to pay for themselves, you might be better off letting the crews go unsupervised. That's why it is essential the production manager have very specific goals for increasing efficiency and controlling quality.

When helping companies with production management, the first thing I do is take the owner with me to observe the crews working. It is, without fail, an eye-opener for the owner to see his or her workers' lack of efficiency. Even companies with low costs compared to the industry in general have a great deal of waste.

If you are to be successful, your production managers must be able to observe their crews with an eye for efficiency or lack thereof. They then need to retrain their crews and help them develop the right habits. For example, when I watched a crew dead head some roses, I noticed the worker doing the pruning was cutting off the dead blooms and throwing them on the ground. Afterward, workers raked the blooms on the ground into a pile on the sidewalk and transferred them into a trash can, leaving some debris on the sidewalk. Yet another employee blew the debris off with a blower. Quite a bit of labor was wasted through that process. The pruner could have cut off the blooms and thrown them directly into the trash can, moving it with him as he went plant to plant.

If you are to be successful, you must require your production managers observe their crews in the field. That way, they can show them first hand how best to perform their work. The more efficiently crews work on the job, the more time and money it saves you. It is not a case of inspiring your crews to work harder. Most crews work hard, they just do not work smart.