

# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Letting go of poor performers is tough, but it pays off.



Eric Bruss

**COMPANY:** Bruss Landscaping

**HEADQUARTERS:** Wheaton, Ill.

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 28

**CLIENTELE:** Entirely residential

**SERVICES:** 75 percent design/build; 25 percent maintenance

**2011 REVENUE:** \$3.1 million

**2012 PROJECTED REVENUE:** \$3.5 million

**H**ANGING ON TO the wrong employee was a mistake Eric Bruss made not once, but twice. Although he knew he didn't have the right person for the job, he says he tried to make it work because he wanted to be a nice guy. In the end, it would have been better for everyone if he'd followed his gut.

Bruss, the president of Bruss Landscaping, Wheaton, Ill., admits to first making the mistake seven years ago. He needed someone to do design/sales and help the production manager oversee the crews. At the time, the company was relatively small and needed a multi-talented person.

"Within the first couple of months there were red flags that it wasn't working," Bruss says. "This individual wasn't commanding respect from the labor force and on the design and sales side was becoming more of an order taker than a leader."

But Bruss wanted to make it work. First he tried changing schedules around so the person was handling different crews. When the same problems ensued, he moved him to solely design and sales work. But it still wasn't working.

"He was only producing at about 50 percent of his potential," says Bruss. "Although he was selling enough to cover his cost, he just wasn't producing

what he should. I started holding his hand constantly and telling him what to do, to the point where I was the puppeteer. I dragged this out for five years until I finally had to cut off the dead branch."

Unfortunately, when Bruss hired the replacement, he soon fell into the same trap. Although the new designer was highly skilled, the way she worked didn't quite fit into the very structured environment Bruss operated.

"I knew it wasn't a good match for either of us, but, like before, I let it drag on because I didn't have the heart to let her go," he says. "It went on through the winter and then mid-season in the spring I finally had to make some changes."

**"YOUR GUT LETS YOU KNOW THE RIGHT DECISION PRETTY QUICKLY."**

He had good intentions, but Bruss acknowledges it was a mistake to hold off on letting the employee go.

"In the end, although I was trying to be nice by keeping her on, I ended up doing just the opposite," he says. "I left her without a job in the middle of peak season. It was a disservice to both of us. I was without a designer in the

middle of busy season and she was without a job at a time when it would be hard to find a new one. Frankly, it would have been much fairer to everyone if I had just handled it right away."

Bruss says these mistakes cost him a lot. In the first situation, the lack of production was a loss of potential earnings. And in both situations, the biggest loss was in growth.

Since committing these mistakes, Bruss says he's learned to follow his instinct. "Your gut lets you know the right decision pretty quickly," he says. "You just have to listen to it. The problem is we usually start overthinking things or we follow our heart."

Although Bruss says it's still always difficult to let an employee go, it's unfair to everyone when you try to force something to work.

"As much as you may think you're helping that person by continuing to keep them on even if they don't fit, you'd actually do yourself—and that employee—a favor by ending it," he says. "On the business side, it's obvious. You're now able to move forward. But for that employee, it's also an opportunity to move on with their life instead of staying in a position that isn't really working and is ultimately not going to work out. If I had followed my gut rather than my heart in both of these situations, I think everyone would have been better off in the end."

Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering the landscape industry.