

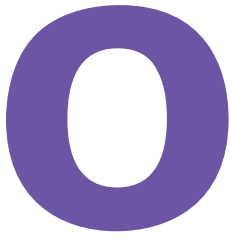
# RAISING THE BAR

With its annual Next Level University, the Next Level peer group opens up the discussion to its managers, challenging them to grow and learn from their counterparts.

BY BETH GERACI



College faculty and managers from six landscaping companies discuss online notes they compiled for Next Level University.



**O**n a cool autumn day in downtown Chicago, nearly 100 landscape professionals and college faculty

gather at the city's newest trendy hotel, the Public Chicago.

The night before, the group traveled to the Windy City suburbs for a homemade Italian dinner and a round of bocce ball. Now, they're ready to get down to business—the business of Next Level University.

The annual two-day summit, now in its third year, brings together members of the Next Level peer group and their top-level managers. They're there to brainstorm, exchange constructive criticism, establish goals for 2013 and ultimately, learn from each other.

The Next Level peer group comprises executives from Heads Up Landscape Contractors, Albuquerque, N.M.; HighGrove Partners, Atlanta; Lambert Landscape Co., Dallas; Mariani Landscape, Lake Bluff, Ill.; Pacific Landscape Management, Hillsboro, Ore.; and Stay Green Inc., Santa Clarita, Calif. They have convened several times a year for the last eight years, problem solving and holding each other accountable.

The University is unique in that the companies' owners invite certain staff members, along with horticulture faculty from around the country, to participate.

"Inviting the other staff just kind of evolved as the owners started thinking, 'What do we do to make it better?'" says industry consultant Bruce Wilson of the Wilson-Oyler Group, who assembled and facilitates the Next Level peer group. "Opening it up to people with other positions in the organization is good, because it means training is reaching deeper levels of the organization."

What's most important, says Stay Green President and CEO Chris Angelo, "is that they're amongst their peers, people who aren't in their organization.

## Getting schooled

The faculty component of Next Level University makes it unique, says industry consultant Bruce Wilson, of the Wilson-Oyler Group. When the six-company peer group called Next Level first assembled eight years ago, he explains, only its members HighGrove Partners and Mariani Landscape recruited at colleges. Now, all six companies recruit, sharing booth space at Student Career Days every year.

Having faculty present at Next Level University helps horticulture professors see firsthand the professionalism of landscaping businesses, giving them a clear picture of what lessons they need to be teaching their students if their students are to be hired by reputable landscaping companies.

Next Level peers, on the other hand, hear what issues universities are grappling with and learn how both sides can better work together.

At November's University, faculty and owners gathered in a discussion circle and opined about everything from motivation and listening to customers to the perception of the industry among parents and the decline of horticulture programs.

Wilson, for his part, pledged to make a new push for college recruiting in his other peer groups and challenged the Next Level owners to think less about what they already know and more about what's possible if they push the boundaries.

The discussion became energized when Phil Allen, Ph.D., a landscape management professor at Brigham Young University, brought up the fact that parents he speaks with have a misperception that the industry is unprofessional.

"It's like, has the term 'landscaper' become so loaded?" he asked.

"We love it," replied Mariani Landscape CEO Frank Mariani.

"But not everybody does," Allen asserted. "And especially parents. They hear that word 'landscaper' and even 'landscape architect' in our region and they still think you cut grass. And you do, and that's not the point. It's just that, that's a hurdle for you."

"But I think the companies represented here, they're looked upon as real businesses in their communities, no doubt about it," Mariani replied. "And I think we should celebrate that, because we've worked hard to create that image."

So they're hearing things that validate what they're doing. And they're also gaining new insights and perspectives on how to deal with their daily challenges."

The common discourse is something they likely wouldn't experience at major industry events, where they might end up sitting with someone who works in a different sector of the industry.

## BUILDING BLOCKS

As attendees from the six companies divide into small groups to exchange ideas about best practices, it's clear they're a close-knit group.

"What I'm happy to see is that we're starting to build relationships now, which is the goal of these events, so that

you push each other and challenge each other," Frank Mariani, CEO of Mariani Landscape, told those assembled. "Quite frankly, we're only going to be better if we challenge each other."

That challenge is crucial if the event is to be worthwhile, especially considering the financial investment each company makes in the University is substantial. On average, each company spends \$1,000 per employee to attend.

Given that financial stake, Pacific Landscape Management President Bob Grover tells the group, "Let's each take something that we learned here and apply it to our organization in a way that will pay for our time to come here."

Ideally, Grover adds, everybody will

leave knowing they shared a great idea and got one in return.

“Attending the University seems like a reward to our people. It energizes them,” says Gary Mallory, CEO and owner of Heads Up Landscape Contractors. “Some of my employees have said it impresses them that the company focuses on its people. The biggest thing

is the excitement and enthusiasm it’s built up among our employees.”

This year, Heads Up doubled the amount of employees it invited to the University, from nine to 18. And if the company had endless money, Mallory says he would bring as many as 30.

“It’s hard to put a price on the benefits of educating and motivating



Next Level business owners and faculty from select colleges enjoy a farewell Italian dinner in Chicago.

employees,” he says. “If we get one great idea and execute it, it makes the University costs worthwhile.”

At this point, Heads Up walks away from the University with far more ideas than that—five or six on average. The company is about to implement one of those ideas—performing exit interviews with customers when they walk away.

### OPENNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To be part of the Next Level peer group, one must be able to take the criticism along with the praise. Says Grover, “You have to be in the right place in your business life and your personal life to say, ‘I’m not perfect’ and be willing to take a closer look at your plan.”

Mariani says the contrasts that emerge in the discussions can be as valuable as the similarities.

“Some of the best moments are when you hear something where you would say, ‘I would not necessarily do that,’” he tells the group. Advice you don’t like that differentiates one company from another can be just as worthwhile, he says.

For Mallory, Next Level is the most important thing he does all year.

“These are knowledgeable business-people who hold you accountable, and it makes you hold yourself more accountable, too,” he says. “When someone asks you, ‘Why didn’t you do what you said you were going to do last time?’ it’s pretty powerful.”

The bottom line, says Grover, is “it’s nice to have other business folks in similar companies give us feedback, challenging us on whether that’s a good decision or a bad decision. Sometimes, you’re just too close to the issue.” **LM**

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