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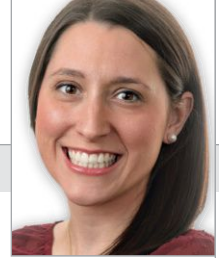
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Guided learning

It's been said many times that there are no shortcuts to success. Yet, it's graduation season, a time when universities and high schools (heck, even kindergartens) parade in well-known speakers to impart wisdom upon their graduates. Many of these speeches draw upon the life experiences of the presenter and offer knowledge from a learn-from-my-mistakes perspective. After all, isn't that the advice we all want to know when we look to someone who we consider a success? We want insight on how they got where they are today and if there are any ways we can succeed faster, easier or less painfully.

It reminds me of the song "Ooh La La" by the Faces. The chorus says, "I wish that I knew what I know now / When I was younger."

That song, circa 1973, is not even remotely about business. (In case you're unfamiliar, it details a grandfather's advice about women to his grandson.) But every time I hear it, it reminds me of the readers of *Landscape Management* and how many people's questions are similar. "What mistakes am I making that I could be avoiding? Am I doing things right? Should I be doing something differently? What do others know that I don't know?"

Those kinds of questions are why we decided to formulate the coverage for our 2014 *LM150* list of the industry's largest companies around a "Lessons learned" theme.

So, as we collected data for this year's report (starting after page 20), we asked the leaders of *LM150* companies,

"What would you have done differently *then*, knowing what you know *now*?"

We received many great responses, which we share with you in the pages of the *LM150* supplement. There's guidance about carving out a niche and acting smaller than you are (see page S15). There's an item on the importance of consistent marketing and building a strong brand (S17). There are powerful stories about the need to delegate and set up processes (S14 and S16) and much more.

But a few folks, like NaturaLawn of America's President Phil Catron, surprised us by saying they wouldn't change a thing.

"There's a purpose for having a learning curve and growing from the decisions you make over the years," Catron says.

It may sound like he's avoiding the question, trying to get off the hook, like the grandfather at the end of "Ooh La La" who says, "Poor young grandson, there's nothing I can say / You'll have to learn, just like me / And that's the hardest way."

We disagree with the grandfather. We believe you *can* learn from others' stories. (And don't worry, we got Catron to share some sage advice.) The tips you take in from other companies' tales might not be shortcuts to success, but at least they can be guideposts along the way.

We hope there's at least one lesson you can learn here to improve yourself or your company. Or maybe you have another one to offer? Email me at mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net and we'll find a way to share yours, too.