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Four factors for success

Want to help your Hispanic employees assimilate quickly? These four factors will get you started

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

Assimilating Hispanics into an organization won't happen overnight, but it can happen with less hassle, better communication and good feelings.

Angelo Miño is human resources and safety director at Signature Landscape in Olathe, KS, and also a consultant in the field of Hispanic labor forces in the industry. A well-known Hispanic speaker at industry meetings, he stresses four factors to keep in mind when dealing with a Hispanic labor force: family, country, god, support.

"These four factors apply generally across Hispanic peoples," Miño says.



Angelo Miño

that you want to work with me. In turn, I'll know that I have to do something extra for you. That's what loyalty does."

Miño listed the four factors for assimilating

Build them into your training and safety courses as a way of creating loyalty and ties between the employer and the workforce. They are so important for us Hispanics — recognition of them will tell me



Humberto Moran's skills in small engine repair landed him a job in a mower maintenance shop.

ing Hispanics, and how you can apply them:

1. Family is important to us

"The extended family is what moves the Hispanic people. Make use of this concept by inviting members of the employee's family to become a little bit more active in company life," Miño says. "For example, when I start a new safety program, I will request my employees to bring me pictures of their wives and their kids, and I will put up a sign saying 'Please work safely — you are important to these people!' Sometimes I ask the wives and the kids to write letters to their husbands or fathers asking them to please work safely. And let me tell you it works — with both Anglo and Hispanic people.

"To increase work quality and produc-

tivity, I give out calling cards so that people can call their families without any extra expense," he adds. "Or I allow one of my employees to call from the phone in my office. That might give me an opportunity to speak with an employee's mother briefly and say, 'Thanks for having such a great boy — he's one of the best people here. But you don't want to speak with me — you want to speak with him!'"

Miño's firm also holds open houses and field days open to the families. "Since in the Hispanic employee's mind, 'It's not just me, it's my family,' make his family part of the company celebrations," he suggests.

"Take one second to ask, 'How are your kids doing in school?' When a child is

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THE HISPANIC PARTNERSHIP



Miguel Angel Arredondo, 23, is from Irapauto, Mexico, and is familiar with irrigation.

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born, put up pictures of the baby and mother on the safety bulletin board," he notes. "Let brothers, sisters and others come and apply for jobs in your company. As a family unit, they will take care of your business like it was their own."

2. We are very patriotic people

"I always advise my clients to create 'international corners' with flags, caps or mementos from a given country and display them on the wall. It's a kind of small museum with a sign that says, 'This company celebrates our multicultural heritage,'" Miño says. "Buy the flags of each of the countries that your people come from, and display them in the break room. When they see their flag every morning, it will motivate them. The message is: 'My boss cares about me. He took the time to go and find my country's flag and put it on the wall.'"

Miño notes the displays are also good tools for marketing. "They tell your clients that you respect your employees and your clients as well, because our United States customer base is increasingly multiracial and multicultural. Plus, if clients and prospective clients see that you take good care of your employees, they may get the

impression that you will take good care of their properties also," he says.

3. We like people to respect our beliefs

Approximately 87% of the United States Hispanic population is Catholic – usually, deeply so. How do you celebrate this factor?

"Change your holiday structure for Hispanic employees," Miño recommends. "If your company offers seven holidays a year for the Hispanics, keep five of the American holidays and switch two. (Memorial Day and Labor Day really don't mean anything to us.) Let the Hispanic people take two days to celebrate really important religious feasts. For example, Mexicans are big on December 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And June 24th, the feast of San Juan, is very important for Puerto Ricans.

"That policy will help your safety rates!" he adds. "Some of my client companies have told me that on the 13th and 14th of December, there are some accidents in the workplace and they want to know why. You're asking them to come to work the day after! The night before, there has been a big celebration – they wait until midnight to go to church and sing the birthday hymn to La Virgen de Guadalupe, and

GOLF COURSE BEAUTY for lawns

then they go and drink and dance! If they show up for work the next day, they'll certainly be tired. They won't produce, and they will expose you and others to the risk of accidents."

His own firm has its own schedule. "Our company is closed on Good Friday. That is a day we celebrate, spending maybe all day in church," he says. "If I'm working that day, and I know my family is in church doing the right thing while I'm not, I won't concentrate on my job anyway. And, of course, that's when accidents happen."

4. From my amigo, I expect support

"Help them with their legal issues, to get drivers' licenses, to build credit," Miño recommends. "Support is important. I like to bring in local financial companies to teach the employees how to develop and use credit. That will build loyalty to your company. With a credit rating, I can buy a house, and I'll be a more responsible worker. I need to pay off that mortgage! So I'll work harder and learn the language."

He also recommends owners pay for someone in the company to become a notary. The employees won't have to take time off and spend money to get documents notarized. "I teach managers how to deal with paperwork to help their employees, like how to get translations done for them," he notes.

This year, Signature Landscape brought in a company to do tax returns. He explains: "This was a big hit – the Hispanic employees, who are even more nervous than you are about their taxes, felt secure. Their company was there with them. That's support!"

— The author is a contributing editor based in Mendham, NJ. For more information about Miño's consulting firm, call 913/438-3364 or contact www.hispsummit.com.

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Circle 117

15 threats to your

We asked three industry pros for 'killer factors' they see as threats to business. Here are 15 things to avoid

Our three sources

BOB ANDREWS is CEO of The Greenskeeper in Carmel, IN, a chemical lawn care company in business since 1981. It concentrates on high-end residential customers and has a newer golf course and sports field division.



RON KUJAWA is chairman of the board of KEI Inc. in Cudahy, WI, and has been in the landscape industry since 1967. KEI, a \$5 million company, is principally a landscape management firm, but also does design/build, interiors, industrial weed control, snow and commercial turf equipment sales.



VICKIE CATE runs Evergreen Interiors in San Diego, a high-end interior landscaping company. Evergreen serves commercial and high-end residential customers.



What drives companies like yours out of business? We asked three experienced landscape pros for their opinions on 'killer factors' to avoid. They are Bob Andrews, CEO of The Greenskeeper, Carmel, IN; Ron Kujawa, chairman of KEI Inc., Cudahy, WI; and Vickie Cate, owner of Evergreen Interiors, San Diego.

Their key items range from management weakness (lack of capital) to personality problems to hiring a bookkeeper that embezzles your company cash. In the spirit of helping you stay in business, here's what we learned about the major mistakes to avoid.

Andrews: Sound business fundamentals

Bob Andrews believes that having a solid fundamental business is the best way to avoid mistakes, but he's seen many people make these mistakes:

1 Lack of fundamental business education. "A lot of new Green Industry people are good technicians, but when it comes to paying taxes, shopping for insurance, buying materials and leasing buildings, they don't know enough. So they go out of business, and they go out pretty quickly," says Andrews. If you don't understand certain elementary business operations, educate yourself, he recommends.

2 Under-capitalization. Smaller firms are often operating on whatever personal resources they have — the mortgage on a house, family loans, etc. "It's

a firm rule that if you figure it's going to take \$100,000 to stay in business, it really will take \$200,000," says Andrews.

3 Lowball pricing to buy business. "New people usually don't have any reputation yet and are not getting referral business. The only way they can figure to get a customer base is to come in as the cheapest on the block. That doesn't work. The easiest competitor for me to take out is the guy who just wants to undercut me. We watch a few of them come in and go every year. The customer who will take them is often the customer we don't want anyway," he adds.

4 Trying to grow too fast. Andrews explains: "I see a number of businesses attempting to grow so fast that they lose control. They can't staff the new work or service it. So they start doing poor quality work for both their old and new customers, and lose everything."

5 Too much marketing. "It doesn't make sense to sell 200 more customers if you're going to lose the 200 you already have. But this is a trend — we see it in some of the larger firms that



Charge a fair price for your services and you won't attract clients seeking the lowest price.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEI INC.

business

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN



Be open to new ways to improve your operation but keep the focus on your firm's core business.

are really more marketing oriented than service oriented," Andrews says. "We know we can sell on our service — that's fairly easy. Keeping the customer is a different ball game."

6 Can't delegate/burnout. "If you want to be an owner, you better bring your lunch to work with you. I see a lot of people who say 'I'm working 14, 15 hours a day... I can't find good help.' Then they see their buddy who works for the Postal Service punching out after eight hours. Some of them can't take it and just bail out. A lot of businesses fail because the individual is just not prepared for the rigors of running the show," he explains.

7 Failure to get involved. "I was president of PLCAA in 1992 and feel strongly about this one. We're pretty much Lone Rangers in our industry. There's not a lot of networking that goes on automatically. You work by yourself and don't have a lot of opportunities to feed off your colleagues. That's why being

involved in an industry trade association locally and with PLCAA nationally has been extraordinarily valuable for me over the years. It has allowed me to meet other people in the same industry, and has helped me become a better person and a better businessman," he adds.

Kujawa: Be realistic

Ron Kujawa sees potential problems crop up when landscape operators fail to focus, set realistic expectations or ignore vital business components like cash flow.

8 Unrealistic expectations. Kujawa explains: "This is a seasonal and cyclical industry. Snow is an extremely profitable item, but it's also very cyclical. An above average snow year could mean a great year of profitability — or a below-average snow year makes for average profit. Too many people base their financial planning on always having a great year." If it doesn't happen, they don't have a recovery plan, he adds.

9 One egg in the basket. "I see firms with only one account — like a big property manager's regional office. Suppose that property manager gets disenchanted with you, or dies, or leaves town or gets replaced? You have to be somewhat diversified, and that means you must make new contacts continually and consistently," Kujawa recommends.

10 Loss of focus. "You have to have a focus, too. You can't go off on every tangent," he says. "Some years ago during a recession when home building was not very vigorous, a lot of landscape construction people got into maintenance. All they accomplished was that they screwed up the market. They didn't understand the maintenance business and they lowballed prices. Now that there's a lot of activity in the home construction market, many people have succumbed to the temptation of leaving their core business — maintenance — and going after construction work. That's a different business! If you jump around, you're likely to let your core business and your long-term customers suffer. You're liable to lose them, and when building falls off, you may have a difficult time recapturing them."

11 Poor cash flow. "More people go out of business because of the lack of cash flow than for lack of profitability," Kujawa states. "Therein lies a huge problem. Younger people in business often confuse cash flow and profitability. You can be profitable, but if your cash flow isn't there, you get in deep trouble (with vendors, for example). And your employees might leave you!"

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12 No focus on people. "The key to all of business is good people," Kujawa stresses. "Focus on them. Take care of and retain good people. If they're happy, they'll make your customers happy. Many of us are great at planting and growing but can't deal with people. It's a common cause of business failure."

15 ways to build your operation

- ▶ Educate yourself; become a business person.
- ▶ Arrange for enough money to operate in a smooth manner.
- ▶ Price to make your services profitable, not just to get business.
- ▶ Have a plan for growth and stick to it. Extra business may sound good, but if you overextend yourself or lose money on the work, what is the gain?
- ▶ Sell only enough business you can reasonably handle.
- ▶ Learn to delegate; you can't do it all.
- ▶ Get involved with other landscape professionals.
- ▶ Have realistic expectations.
- ▶ Diversify your customer base.
- ▶ Focus on your key services.
- ▶ Understand and maintain good cash flow.
- ▶ Focus on people.
- ▶ Be 'in' the business; take it seriously.
- ▶ Always try to improve.
- ▶ Make sure key players are trustworthy.



Take care of and retrain good people. If they're happy, they'll make your customers happy.

13 Not 'being' in business. "You have to make a decision: Are you in business, or are you buying yourself a job? There's a low barrier to entry in our industry — two friends can buy themselves a job. They work on every job themselves. They make \$15 or \$20 an hour. And for some people, this is a good thing. They do excellent work and make a decent living," he explains. "But when they decide to add crews to get bigger, they find they can't work every job themselves. Now they need systems and processes. And they encounter things like overhead, supervision and labor issues — you name it. All of a sudden, they're in business. If they don't understand the difference, they're gone."

14 Complacency. "You'll be in trouble if you don't know what's happening on the cutting edge and if you're not continuously trying to improve your operation," he says. "You need to be aware, to keep learning, to keep doing things better than before. If you don't, one day you'll find you can't compete properly any more. That happens with too many people."

Cate: Screen trusted associates

Vickie Cate's firm handles mostly interior work, but her experience applies to any aspect of a Green Industry operation:

15 Don't hire a crook as your bookkeeper. Evergreen is a 20-year-old, \$350,000 a year company with about 10 full-time staff working for commercial and high-end residential customers. Vicky likes to get out into the field, do sales work and oversee her technicians. So a few years ago, when she found a competent, apparently trustworthy, take-charge bookkeeper, she was delighted.

"Little did I realize that we were a cherry waiting to be picked!" Cate explains. It turned out the go-getter bookkeeper went on to:

- ▶ kite checks and help herself to at least \$65,000 of company funds, and
- ▶ pull off the classic embezzler's stunt: turning the staff against the owner ("She's flighty and incompetent") and towards herself ("You can trust me, I get things done around here").

"It wasn't that I ignored the books completely," Cate says. "I looked at them.

And while I didn't balance the checkbook, I reviewed it. I knew what we took in and what went out. And eventually, there were problems."

Her bank came to think so, too. "We went from having \$50,000 to \$60,000 a month cash flow to a \$300,000 a month cash flow in the checking account! The bank saw that as a red flag."

Eventually, Cate had her CPA firm teach her how to conduct an audit of her books. "I performed the audit myself because the cost of hiring someone to do it was prohibitive," she explains. "I sat down every night and worked painstakingly to reconstruct the entire payables ledgers of my company." What she found horrified her so much that she stopped when she had only reached the first two years of the bookkeeper's five-year stint. "I didn't have the stomach to look back beyond that," Cate confesses.

The result of the audit was a federal prosecution of the bookkeeper for violating banking regulations, and a one-year jail sentence. For Cate, though, getting justice was not enough to solve her problems.

Too close for comfort

By the time Cate did her audit, all of her technicians had left (convinced by the bookkeeper that they were on a bad ship), and she owed all kinds of money to unpaid creditors. Fortunately, three factors saved Cate's firm:

- ▶ friends in the business agreed to do some of her jobs;
- ▶ she landed a huge contract that was all profit pass-through to her just at the right time, generating a lot of cash quickly;
- ▶ after she phoned all her creditors and explained her tale of woe, they agreed to spot her more time.

"It was a very close call," she said.

But how did an otherwise sharp businesswoman get taken in?

"When she applied, the bookkeeper told me that she had previously worked for a number of doctors' offices, all of which had gone bankrupt and out of business," Cate explains. "I was filled with sympathy for her and she was owed all kinds of money! Of course, I should have been asking myself, 'Why did the doctors all go out of business?'"

"Second, the woman's husband was in the military, so they had moved around a lot, making her past hard to pin down. Finally, the embezzler was just plain good at what she did," she said.

Cate's advice is take nothing on faith when hiring somebody who will have access to your finances. Check out everything. "And after you hire them, watch your books like a hawk!"

— The author is a contributing editor based in Mendham, NJ.

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Circle 119

Picture this

BY PHIL FOGARTY

A new employee shows up on a Monday in May. Everyone is running around like maniacs trying to shake the weekend and deal with the list of folks who called off work that morning. The supervisor brings the new person into a back room and positions him or her in front of a 13-inch television/VCR.

"Watch this. I'll be back in . . . a little while," he says.

And as a generic training video on safety standards begins playing, the interest in a fresh face changes into a glazed and dazed look.

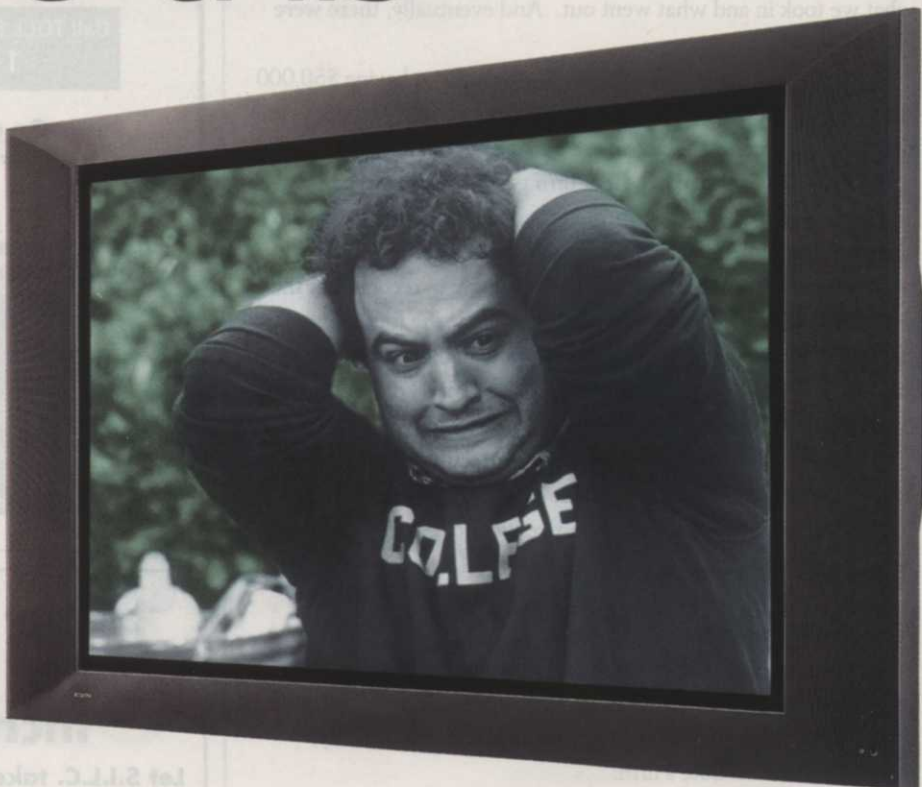
New twist, old idea

Let's try that again with a little twist.

This time, the new employee reports on the day of your weekly training session. He participates in a review of your mission and even offers a suggestion on how to become a better leader for the company.

In this session, the instructor turns everyone's attention to the TV for a video "moment." The tape runs and the group moves out of the work context as they watch an excerpt from "Animal House." As John Belushi charges across the screen, their smiles turn into thoughts of how that movie clip pertains to the topic of the day.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a well-timed and focused video clip is worth at least one chapter in the company manual. Here are a few ways you can use your VCR to keep people interested and having fun:



JOHN BELUSHI: CORBIS IMAGES

You don't have to be an A/V nerd to spice up training. Movies or video clips can make your sessions fun and interesting

- ▶ Use video to emphasize an idea. By using film combined with a live presentation, you get the best of both worlds.
- ▶ Screen your video clips beforehand for inappropriate footage. There is a fine line between humor and vulgarity. When in doubt, ask yourself how theaters would rate it and stay away from anything rated "R."
- ▶ Keep it short — less than five minutes if possible. If an average audience can only pay full attention to a human in person for eight minutes without being involved, imagine their short attention span watching a screen.
- ▶ Set the stage for the video and have questions ready for review right after the viewing.
- ▶ Use all kinds of sources. Motion pictures, TV reruns, professional training tapes and even home movies can work.
- ▶ Consider using a digital camera for instant PowerPoint displays.

— *The author leads the Skills Development Series training system, sponsored by American Cyanamid and Landscape Management. For more information, call JP Horizons at 440/254-8211 or email pfogarty@stratos.net.*