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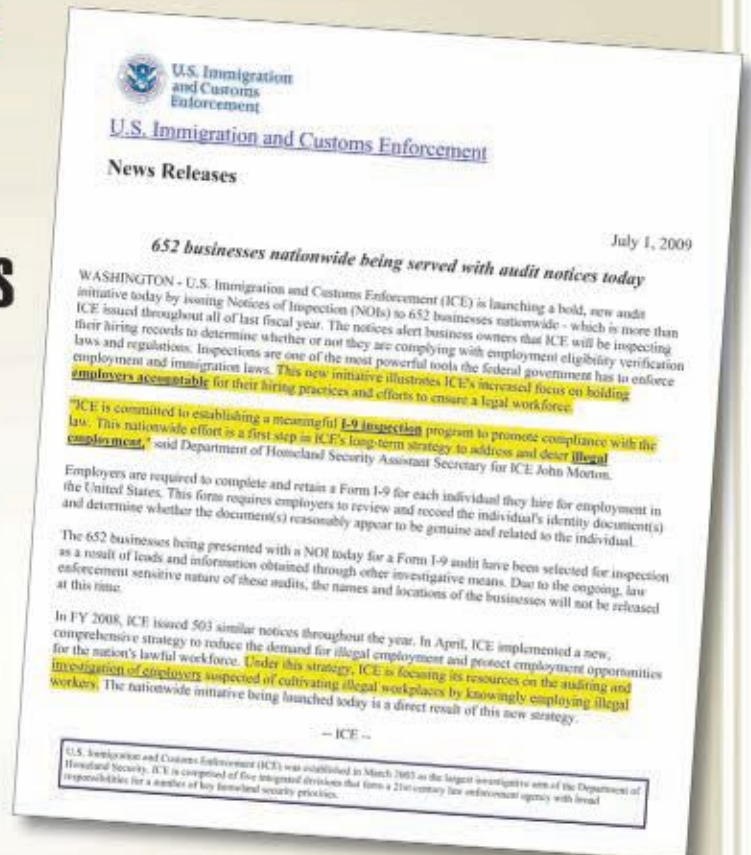
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“ A primary driver of illegal immigration is the labor market and you have to go after the pull that market has created. That means you have to go after the employers who are hiring illegal labor. ”

- U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security
Janet Napolitano

BUSINESS PLANNER 2010

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It's grow or go time

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS / MANAGING EDITOR

THE WORST recession since the 1930s has ended — or so read recent headlines. Although welcome news, it might come as a bit of a shock, or with a snort of derision, to some perusing their books.

Even if the economy has passed a textbook definition of recession, few prognosticators expect a quick return to prosperity. Words such as “slow” and “tentative” are appended to most fiscal pronouncements. Jobs and consumer

spending must rebound significantly before the nation loosens a notch or two on the economic belt it's been tightening for two years.

So now what?

Is it time to start hiring and adding services in preparation for an upswing? Should you cut back or maintain the status quo if the recovery stagnates — or worse, the economy takes another dive? Anyone who promises definitive answers about where we'll be in six months is certifiably insane or attended the Bernie Madoff school of ethics. But that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't prepare.

Start by taking a hard look in the mirror. Assess where you stand and where you have room for improvement. There are, no doubt, areas that have been neglected during these challenging times. Evaluate your customers and service offerings. Make sure they're good fits. And look for acquisition opportunities. Like plants that die each year and soil that reabsorbs their nutrients, businesses that don't survive economically this winter can provide fertilizer for those that do.

On the following pages, the editors of *Landscape Management* have collected sage advice from some of the most fertile minds in

the Green Industry. We've divided our Business Planner 2010 into three sections — People Power, Strategic Solutions and Tools & Techniques, to target key growth opportunities.

Follow a group of executives as they learn from one another during a peer-review group process. Listen to veteran business owner Wayne Volz offer advice about surviving the challenges of this economy. Get the most out of what you have. Read our quintet of regular columnists: Bruce Wilson, Jim Wilson, Kevin Kehoe, Jim Paluch and Tyler Whitaker. Learn how to stay competitive from marketing whiz Harvey Goldglantz and how to train managers to think like owners from Jonathan Goldhill, our resident growth coach. Last but not least, survey new time- and money-saving tools designed especially for landscape and lawn care professionals.

We can't accurately predict the state of the economy six months from now. But as 2009 nears its end, we can say with a degree of confidence hope for an impending recover is in the air. Next year, we hope to be writing about how to manage your explosive growth. Until then, we offer our Business Planner 2010 — another keeper issue designed to help you turn today's obstacles into tomorrow's opportunities. **LM**

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or e-mail at djacobs@questex.com



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TAKE AWAY

Peer group members serve as an informal board of directors.

A good facilitator keeps people on track.

It's important to narrow the focus of the issue that needs to be addressed.

With a little help from my

A peer group forces Green Industry business owners to take a hard look at their operations and own up to tough decisions.

BY DANIEL G. JACOBS /
MANAGING EDITOR

Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends ... Mm, I get high with a little help from my friends ... Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends

WHO KNEW 42 years ago The Beatles were delivering some solid business advice in their classic “With a Little Help From My Friends.” OK, so maybe the second line of the chorus doesn’t quite fit, but we’re going to assume they meant higher profits.

Business advice takes all forms — rock songs, books, family, friends, customers, strangers, professional associations, trade magazines and consultants, to name a few — and they all offer varying degrees of credibility. Of all these, few extend the intimacy of the peer group.

“Anybody who is interested in having their business grow should be a part of something like this,” says John Rennels, owner of A Plus Lawn and Landscape, Lawrenceburg, KY. “The information is invaluable. As a business owner, whom do you bounce your ideas off? I’m constantly looking for areas where I can pick up information. It might be on a service offering, on financials or on customer service. This is an opportunity where you can share people’s successes and failures and learn from those, and maybe save yourself some heartache and financial loss.”

Rennels isn’t alone. More Green Industry professionals are joining peer review groups, sharing more openly and honestly their issues and shortcomings, which often leads their sales

and margins to new highs — with a little help from their friends.

There are a number of approaches to the peer group process. This article explores one.

Rennels has spent a little more than a year as part of a peer group run by consultant, author and business owner Jeffrey Scott. Having spent years in Europe and the United States both running and participating in groups, Scott now runs a consulting operation facilitating peer groups. And he’s written a book on the subject, “The Leader’s Edge,” which at press time was on its way to the printer.

“You learn good stuff,” Scott says about the peer group process.

“The core process is the opposite of how (a group) of guys getting together without a facilitator might work. What they do is just bat around ideas. We try not to do that. We try to have somebody there to put a specific problem on the table to discuss.”

Why it works

Scott assembles his peer groups from business owners around the country.

Members of Scott’s peer groups must open their

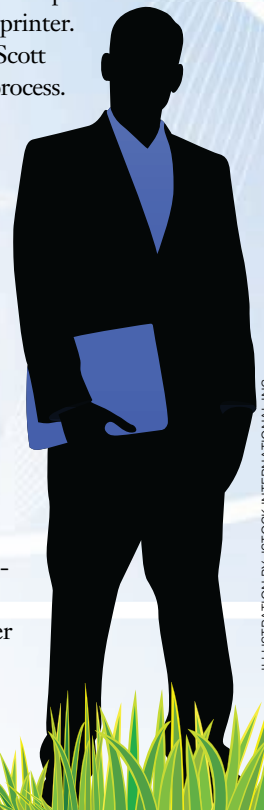


ILLUSTRATION BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

friends

books and operations to other participants, so having non-competing group members is essential.

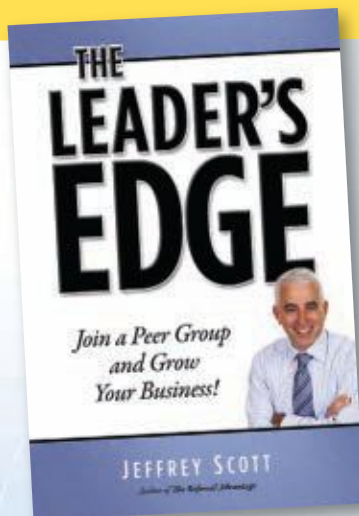
“The more you share with the group, the more the group is going to help you,” Scott says. “You’d better be comfortable sharing everything, really.”

Matt Kulp, owner of Showcase Group, New Holland, PA, agrees.

“These guys basically became my Board of Advisors,” Kulp says. “I finally realized I’m not the only one in the Green Industry dealing with these same issues. It is about meeting with others confronted with the same issues. We are all able to learn from each other.”

Learning from unbiased peers is one thing that makes the process valuable, Rennels says.

“If you were to ask your employees or your



HE WROTE THE BOOK ON IT

Jeffrey Scott's latest book, "**The Leader's Edge: Join a Peer Group and Grow Your Business,**" is due out this month. In it, Scott discusses how the peer group process can help Green Industry business owners grow their operations.

"What got you here, will not get you to the next level in your business," Scott tells members of the green industry peer groups he leads. You can't grow by simply by doing things the same old way.

"The Leader's Edge" shows owners and managers how to use Green Industry

peer groups to step back from what isn't working and leverage the insights and experience of a facilitated peer group to do things differently — and secure better results.

The book is for owners looking to transform their operations and who are willing to consider a new approach to honing their leadership skills and management and decision-making practices.

Scott uses Green Industry examples and case studies to show owners there are quicker, less-stressful ways to grow their businesses, without the headaches and stress. The book shows professionals how to use peer groups to develop the strategies needed to grow your business and make it more profitable.

Scott also is the author of *The Referral Advantage*. For more information on these books and the facilitated peer review group process, visit JeffreyScott.biz.



Peer groups offer business owners insight into their own operations.



"THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES... TO SAVE YOURSELF HEARTACHE AND... LOSS."

JOHN RENNELS, owner, A Plus Lawn and Landscape

friends any family business-type questions, you will get a slanted answer," he explains. "Unfortunately, a lot of times (employees) are going to tell you what you want to hear, and friends don't want to hurt your feelings. And friends don't necessarily come from a position of knowledge about what you're doing."

That's not the case with members of a peer group.

"It's invaluable information," Rennels says. "They're honest. They're going to tell you information whether you want to hear it or not."

The group meets formally four times a year either through a phone conference or a visit to one of the group member's offices.

During a conference call in April, Rennels mentioned he was working between 100 and 120 hours a week. Yet he took four hours out of one of those weeks to participate in the peer group — and that doesn't include the time he took to prepare for the discussions.

"People join because they think they're going to copy the other guy's good ideas," Scott says. "That's not what happens. What happens is, the other guys hold up a mirror and help you uncover your own opportunities you're not seeing within your business."

Size matters

It is important to have enough people in the group to keep the ideas flowing.

"A small group can feel more intimate initially, but also can run out of steam," Scott says. "At some point, (a small group) settles down into a way of working where the innovativeness can get tapped out."

Small groups also can suffer from what Scott calls "group think," when one strong personality dominates and the rest of the members adopt his opinions. That doesn't happen as easily in a larger group.

Scott likes double-digit sized groups.

"Ten or 12 are fine to have in a

continued on page 60

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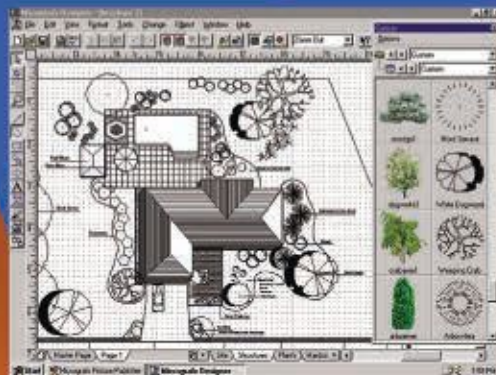
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"I REALIZED I'M **NOT THE ONLY ONE** IN THE GREEN INDUSTRY DEALING WITH THESE SAME ISSUES."

MATT KULP, owner, Showcase Group

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group," he says. "It sounds like a lot, but you actually get more value with nine guys looking at your problem versus three. It requires good facilitation. You need a guy who knows how to handle that size group. Short term, a small group feels better, but it's really not."

Over the years, during the natural course of life and business, a group's members might change.

"People come and go, and they do it because their lives change," Scott says.

It could be divorce, selling a business, a merger, a new partner, or any number of reasons. But changes to the group don't mean the group dissolves.

Exploring an issue

For each meeting, members of the group come prepared to discuss a single, narrowly focused issue and to explain the steps they took on the issues discussed during their most recent meeting.

At the April meeting, Scott begins with a reminder about the process: "We're just going to ask John questions. We're going to ask him single questions. We're not going to give him any advice up-front. We're going to help peel the onion to his issue."

For the next several minutes, Rennels explains details about the actions he took on the issues he raised at the past meeting. He talks about working more closely with his accountant, pushing 12-month contracts with commercial clients and a couple of other related issues. The others listen quietly.

When he finishes, Scott prods Rennels into the issue he needs help with today: "How to attract, qualify and retain an excellent, well-qualified landscape designer."

Rennels spends the next few minutes explaining what he's done so far. Rennels is on his seventh candidate, a landscape architect with an extensive background in high-end properties, who saw his busi-

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