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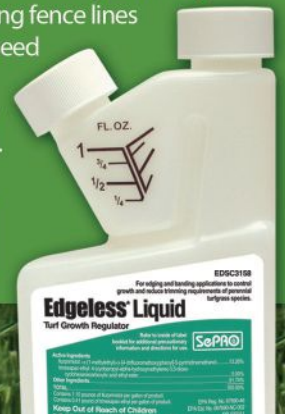
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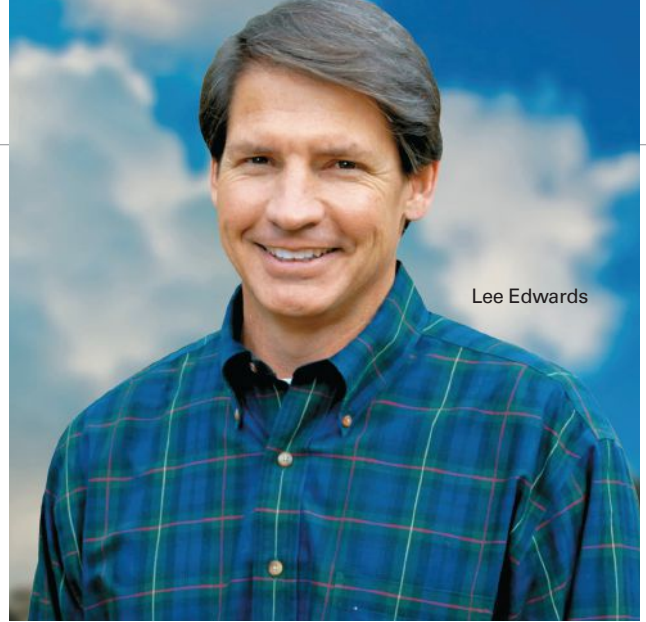
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Lee Edwards

In 2001, Hilton Head, SC-based landscape company The Greenery began transitioning to an employee-owned company. Now, The Greenery has been entirely owned by its employees for more than three years. The structure, says The Greenery President and Chief Executive Officer **Lee Edwards**, has spurred “an ownership mentality among employees, which in turn fosters more teamwork, better communication and better morale among a diverse workforce.”

For a landscape company that focuses on projects and properties requiring complex construction and special attention to detail, having that strong employee partnership is vital. It fuels workers’ passion for the job, Edwards says, as he stops to share with *LM* what is driving the maintenance industry as a whole.

TOP TRENDS

› **Sustainability.** Sustainability seems to be the word of the day, and Hilton Head was founded as one of the original “green” communities in the country. We are trying to sell our customers on better, more efficient irrigation systems, organic turf and ornamental management, and use of more native species.

› **Innovations in technology and communications.** As gas prices increase and as the economy improves, driving up labor costs, we are seeing more equipment innovations than ever. Everyone will need to look at the way they have been doing business, and reassess how they will cope in the near future. Being efficient will not be an option.

These days, most customers want it all: fair price, quality service and good communication, so we give it to them. Communication is something that has changed dramatically over the past couple of years. Now all of our supervisors have mobile communication devices so they can email, text and talk to customers about their properties in real time, as well as send photographs. The days of sending a monthly report to a property manager or property owners association board are over. Now they want immediate communication.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **The economy.** The economic downturn in real estate development has affected us, as well as most areas of the country. For years, our bread

and butter was new resorts, hotels, golf clubs and high-end residential real estate developments up and down the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. When we finished landscaping a new

development, that fed directly into our maintenance business. Now, if we want new maintenance business, we have to go out and get it rather than let it come to us. This has made us change the way we do business. Painful in the short-term, but now that we have made the adjustments, we are seeing success.

INSIDE INFO

Company: The Greenery

Headquarters: Hilton Head, SC

Employees: 400

2010 revenue: \$25.2 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: Having great people willing to lead. If we have that, we can be innovative and stay ahead of the competition. Our people are our greatest asset, not our greatest cost. We usually find that we are on the leading edge of service, product quality and innovative methodologies used in the Green Industry. This makes us more attractive to prospective employees, which helps us recruit and retain long-term employees. It also sets us apart from some of our competitors.

Over the last couple of years, we have seen a gradual transition as everyone starts to realize they all have a serious stake in the long-term success of the company. This is something that truly sets us apart from our competition, both internally — happy employees with little turnover — and externally — high performance output among the workforce. We as management see it, but it is even more rewarding when our clients notice the difference.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Working with institutions.** Acquiring work from institutions such as schools, the military and governmental agencies is something we have never pursued very hard in the past. But now we are, and we are doing it successfully. In the past, many of these institutions have done their landscaping in-house. But in recent years, many of these folks are realizing that outsourcing of landscape services is not only more cost-effective, but gets them higher quality as well. The level of quality being demanded in some of those markets is trending up. We are taking advantage of these opportunities, and have won several of these contracts.

› **A larger available workforce from which to choose employees.** Over the last couple of years in a bad economy, we are seeing many new faces looking for jobs. Some of these folks are not who we might normally see looking for a landscaping job, and that gives us an opportunity to tap into a larger workforce. This past spring, we were looking to hire about 20 full-time and 20 seasonal crew members, so we held a job fair. Over two days, we had over 200 people show up. Many of these people want some upward mobility in a company, and we are able to provide that opportunity to the right individuals. This is the right time for us to invest in people, training and overall skills improvement.



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RESOURCES

AD INDEX

The Andersons	6
Belgard	7
Blizzard	30
Border Magic	18
Corona Clipper	42
Dodge Chrysler	CV2-1
Dow AgroSciences	27, 47
PRO Landscape by Drafrix	13
Earthway Products	36
Emak USA	17B
Fisher	38
FMC	5, 20
GIE + EXPO	45
Hardscape	40
Irrigation Association	53
L T Rich	CV3
MistAway Systems	16
Pine Hall Brick	9
PLANET	28

Polaris Industries	11
Pro-Tech	37
QXpress	19
R & K Pump	39
Rain Bird	23A, CV4
Reddick Equipment	34
Schiller Grounds Care	15
Sepro	51
Super Lawn Trucks	41B
Syngenta	17A
Target Speciality Products	41A
Trynex	35
Turfco	21, 43
US Lawns	3
Venrac	23B
Versa Lok	25
Vista Professional	44
Walker Mfg	45
Western Products	33

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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Rooting out employee problems from the start can prevent serious costs and problems.

CHRIS LEE, PRESIDENT of Texas-based EarthWorks Inc., has learned to tackle employee problems practically from the moment they appear. In fact, Lee has realized that even small issues, which seem like isolated incidents, can be warning signs of larger problems to come. It's a lesson Lee says was costly for his company — and it's why he made some important changes.

After a \$25,000 workers' comp claim that Lee is convinced was illegitimate, he found himself thinking about the employee's time at the company. The warning signs were there, but the problems all began as small and seemingly unrelated incidents.

"What we've figured out is that almost any time you have a serious employee problem, whether it's an illegitimate workers' comp claim, insubordination or even a potential lawsuit, it can almost always be traced back to something that should have alerted you early on," says Lee. "Maybe it's a customer complaint, or a complaint from one of your foremen. It seems like something small, but it's not."

Lee says that one of the roadblocks to putting two and two together at his company was poor communication. The customer service department may have gotten a complaint about an employee from

a client, and the foreman might have been having problems — but unless all of this was communicated, it made the issues seem small and isolated.

"When there's a truly problematic employee, there's almost always a pattern, so it's important that everyone is in communication," says Lee. "What we now do differently is host a daily production meeting. The meeting involves every manager in the company, from customer service to operations to HR. That way, we can bring up any employee complaint and address it right away."

Avoid complacency

Addressing it right away is a large part of the solution. Lee says it can be tempting to let an employee problem slide because it's not always easy to find laborers, even in this economy.

"This is tough work, so it can be hard to find people who want to do the job," he admits. "At times you're short-handed or in the middle of a job, and you feel like you just want to squeeze a couple more days out of an employee before you address the issue — but that's inevitably when something will go horribly bad.

"We've learned that no matter how much we need the job to be done, we need to protect our business even more. It can be hard to accept, but it's better to lose a little production

time than to jeopardize the whole company."

Now, from the very first time Lee gets a complaint about an employee, he takes immediate action. He has implemented a two-strike policy: "The first time we get the complaint, we reassign them to a different crew and tell them that they have a strike," says Lee. "That gives them a fresh start. We understand that sometimes it's just a personality conflict, and we don't want to fire someone if they might work well in a different crew. But we make sure the employee understands that if we get complaints from their new crew, that we have to get rid of them."

Lee says he's also learned some of the red flags that can alert him an employee might turn out to be a problem. It's often evident from the very first week on the job, he adds.

"Anytime you get an employee that does the bare minimum or doesn't want to work, it's a person who can turn out to be a real problem," he warns.

If issues aren't addressed immediately, Lee says, they can affect a crew's morale.

"Once you let just a little bit of that poison into the water, it can take a great group of guys and cause them to suddenly feel like they're working too hard or not getting paid enough," he says. "That's a bad situation that you need to prevent from the start."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.



Chris Lee



COMPANY: EarthWorks Inc.

HEADQUARTERS: Lillian, TX

2010 REVENUE: \$13.5 million

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 300

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