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occur when one of our own members does a presentation on something his or her company does very well. It could be about snow, lawn maintenance or design/build. Whatever the topic is, when peers talk, everybody listens.

The cost of a state association membership is usually minimal—typically a few hundred dollars per year, depending on the company's size. In addition to the great networking opportunities, member benefits often include a health benefits program, member discounts and educational opportunities.

## Peer groups

Another C2C opportunity is peer groups: collections of professionals (typically six to 12 contractors) who have scheduled meetings, both face to face and via conference calls, to openly discuss their businesses. Peer groups provide more structure to the sharing process than association memberships and are managed by facilitators or consultants. They can be made up of a local group of peers within driving distance of each other or a national

## THE MORE YOU SHARE, THE MORE OTHERS WILL SHARE WITH YOU.



group of landscape contractors that are in different states.

Professionally managed peer groups have specific criteria for their members, such as company size, type and/or geographic location. The cost of these types of peer groups can run anywhere from \$1,500 to

\$10,000 or more a year, depending on the frequency and intensity of the meetings. Meetings can be held once a month, once a quarter or once a year. They can happen in person or via a conference calling bridge.

A great way to try out C2C networking is to attend the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) Green Industry Conference (GIC) in Louisville, Ky., held every October, and participate in the Breakfast with Champions event. It features many roundtable discussions, where you and nine peers enjoy breakfast while



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discussing a specific topic that is assigned to your table. One of the greatest things about this event is that you have no idea who's going to sit down with you. It could be anyone from a kid just out of college looking for advice on how to get started in the industry to the owner of a multimillion-dollar landscape company looking to share his or her experiences with you.

PLANET membership ranges from \$340 for a smaller contractor to \$8,820 for companies worth more than \$100 million.

### Social media

If you're still not sure if these opportunities sound good to you, a third and very convenient way to C2C network is online. The business social media site LinkedIn is a great example. There are dozens of "groups" that focus on Green Industry topics and are filled with companies seeking advice or willing to give it on almost any topic. And it's free. I am a member of several of them, including

"Landscape Design-Build" and "Landscape Construction." I also belong to several association groups including Landscape Ontario and the APLD. Outside of LinkedIn there are various landscape and lawn care industry message board sites where many companies get great advice, especially early on in their careers.

One last option to consider is membership websites where you can C2C network through an open discussion forum, weekly conference calls or online virtual peer groups.

However you decide to get involved with C2C networking, I can promise you one thing: The more you share, the more others will share with you.

That's good advice from one contractor to another. **LM**



#### QUICK TIP

**A great way to try out C2C networking is to attend the Green Industry Conference and participate in the Breakfast with Champions event.**

*Shilan, a Landscape Management columnist, is an award-winning landscape designer, consultant and former contractor. He's executive director of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association and editor of the membership site FromDesign2Build.com.*



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HOW-TO



# Improve your work/life balance

BY JASON CUPP

**A**t some point in their careers, most business owners have to take a hard look in the mirror and address their work/life balance. When I ran my own landscape company, I was a statistic on the work side of the balance—working 70 to 80 hours a week, sometimes seven days a week, including early mornings and late nights. It affected my sleep, health and the success of my company, but hindsight is 20/20.

A lack of an appropriate work/life balance hinders the health of your business. Everything can be at risk—including culture, efficiency, energy and profitability. The solution starts with the owner, CEO or upper management. It comes down to 10 simple, easily executable strategies:

**1 MANAGE YOUR TIME.** Divide your day into blocks of time to execute tasks. If there are three blocks per day, only work two. I used 7 a.m. to noon, noon to 5 p.m., and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. For example, if I had an evening meeting, I'd likely work noon to 10 p.m. and take the morning off.

**2 WORK FROM HOME.** Working from home can be efficient. Most days, I'd work from home in the morning and go into the office after a lunch meeting. Mornings were project based, and afternoons were client and team based.

**3 HIRE YOUR WEAKNESSES.** It might pay off to invest in your office team, including an executive assistant for yourself. My assistant was my left arm,

so to speak, and was an integral part of my business strategy to help with sales appointments, time management, accountability and executing tasks.

**4 RESIST WEEKEND WORK.** Although weekends are necessary in peak sales and operations times, such as spring, fall and winter events, they also should be held as sacred time off. We often had crews running on Saturday because of weather, but we split Saturdays among our managers, so each one only had to work one out of every six or eight Saturdays.

**5 RETREAT.** It's amazing what a clear mind can do for you when planning and running your business day to day. Several times a year for a few days, I'd retreat by myself to think, reflect, rest and strategize. I was offline during this time, other than an emergency. It refreshed me to be more focused when I was in the office.

**6 VACATION.** It's difficult, but make it happen. Take a few days here and there; then try to take an entire week. Pick a time when business is slower. If you work on building your team, you'll be surprised how well things will run in your absence. Avoid the staycation. Otherwise, if the office is, say, 20 minutes away, you might trek in to work on a few things.

**7 UNPLUG.** We're slaves to our iPhones, laptops, social media and the Internet. Unplug a few hours a day. Try to schedule time for phone calls rather than just answering your phone on a whim.

It might cost you 45 minutes when you don't have that much time to give.

**8 SCHEDULE.** Use your schedule to accomplish tasks. Big client

contract you need to write? Schedule it. Need to review your financials? Schedule it. Blocking off time to accomplish tasks allowed my day to be less free flowing, and I accomplished more quicker.

**9 JOIN A PEER GROUP.** Consider meeting regularly with a peer group to provide accountability and serve as a sounding board for the challenges of running a business. None of mine were in the Green Industry; they were local and served as lead generators.

**10 INVEST IN YOURSELF.** Most business owners spend a lot of time investing in their teams and ignore themselves. Hitting the gym, networking at a local charity, donating your time to a worthwhile cause or scheduling a massage are all things that are investments in you, which is OK. An investment in ourselves re-energizes our business minds and our bodies.

I hope these tips help you regain control of your work/life balance struggle. Don't stop with you. Chances are everyone in your organization can benefit from a company culture that values individuals' time, so consider the investment. The effect could be tenfold when your employees are afforded the same luxury of focusing on themselves rather than work every second of the day. The results—in company culture and the bottom line—will be dramatic. **LM**

*Cupp is a former Green Industry CEO turned Kolbe Certified Growth Consultant. Follow him on Twitter @jasoncupp or visit [jasoncupp.com](http://jasoncupp.com).*

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HOW-TO

# Fire an employee

BY BILL ARMAN

**W**hen it comes time to fire an employee, there are many questions and concerns—fears of discrimination, wrongful termination, retaliation—that can weigh heavily on landscape contractors’ minds and pocketbooks. So let’s review the fundamental process for conducting an employee termination fairly, correctly and consistently.

To start, be prepared. Collect the facts, review them and interpret them objectively. Ask:

**WHAT DOES HIS LAST PERFORMANCE REVIEW LOOK LIKE?** Invariably, when I ask this question, the answer is “I don’t know” or “We haven’t done performance reviews for a while—actually, ever.”

**ARE PERFORMANCE OR BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS WELL DOCUMENTED?** If there are problems with an employee, it must be reflected in his performance reviews. If there’s no documentation, then you might need to rethink your plan.

**ARE THERE ANY WRITTEN WARNINGS?** Has the company made it clear to the employee that if his behavior or lack of performance continues his job is in jeopardy? Written warnings must explicitly state to employees the consequences of not improving their performance. Managers need to be clear (in writing and signed) that whatever the employee is doing or not doing could result in job loss.

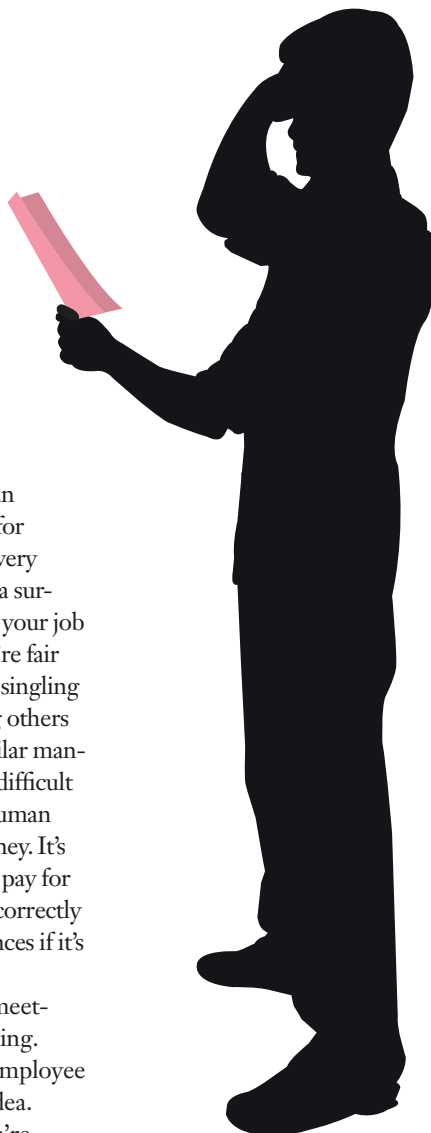
Without documentation, an employee has a stronger case for wrongful termination. At the very least, being fired shouldn’t be a surprise. If it is, you haven’t done your job as a fair leader. Be certain you’re fair and consistent and you’re not singling out this person while allowing others to perform or behave in a similar manner. If you have a particularly difficult issue, seek assistance from a human resource expert or labor attorney. It’s considerably less expensive to pay for expertise to fire an employee correctly than paying for the consequences if it’s done incorrectly.

Plan for the termination meeting by scripting it and practicing. Winging a meeting with an employee you’re going to fire is a bad idea. If you don’t prepare what you’re going to say to the employee, you could speak out of turn, and your comments could be fodder for a lawsuit. Determine who’s going to say what during the meeting. Let the employee know the purpose of the meeting from the start. Determine what’s going to happen after the

meeting and who’s going to do what. For example, will you need to take the terminated employee home?

If the termination is because of a chronic performance problem, a fundamental script should be used: “As you know, you and I have had several meetings during the past several weeks/months to discuss your performance-related problems (e.g., interpersonal skills, accuracy of work, not wearing personal protective equipment, etc.). Despite that documented coaching, your performance hasn’t improved to the required level of your position and is negatively affecting company operations. As such, today will be your last day of employment with the company.”

*continued on page 48*



**QUICK TIP**

**Remember to show respect and dignity. Employees at all levels deserve to be treated well when their employment is being terminated, whether it's because of performance, behavior or**  
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MANAGERS WHO FEEL BAD ABOUT HAVING TO FIRE AN EMPLOYEE SOMETIMES WILL TRY TO SOFTEN THE BLOW TO THE EMPLOYEE DURING THE MEETING. BE CONCISE AND TO THE POINT. STICK TO YOUR LINE.

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If the termination is because of a significant policy violation, a different fundamental script should be used: “An investigation has provided us with evidence you violated company policy (i.e., sexual harassment, alcohol use, time card fraud) on (specify date). As stated in the employee handbook you signed (specify date), that policy violation results in employee termination. As such, today will be your last day of employment with the company.”

Make sure you have everything ready to go:

- › Cut the employee’s final paycheck and include pay for any unused vacation.
- › Have the termination form acknowledging administrative details ready to sign.
- › Provide the employee with a COBRA notice so he or she knows how much it will cost to continue health insurance.
- › Provide 401K information.
- › Where appropriate, provide transportation home. Don’t let him or her take a company vehicle home.

### **Plan the details**

Planning the details of the termination helps demonstrate respect for the employee. This will show you care enough about the employee to think about the questions and issues he or she will face.

Do it in person, not through email, a letter or over the phone. Remain calm, and be prepared for potential responses such as swearing or crying. Make it quick, about 20 minutes maximum. Have two people other than the employee present—one person should be the point communicator and the other is the witness. Conduct the meeting in a quiet, private space with no interruptions and when few people are around.

Remember to cut to the chase. For example, “Bob, we’re meeting today because we need to let you go. Today is your last day here.” If the employee asks why they’re getting fired, have a line and stick to it. For example: “We’ve discussed your performance or behavior several times.

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# Landscape Management

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# THE GOOD BAD & UGLY



Green Industry optimism is up. Still, many firms haven't recovered from the recession and are struggling with tough weather years.

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