

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF EMPLOYEES¹

by Spence Rosenfeld

Many Arborists today feel that the number one problem in our industry is hiring and retaining employees. We hear that tree climbers have become obsolete and that the situation will worsen before getting better. Statistics indicate that the number of potential tree care workers entering the labor market is continually diminishing. In addition we have all experienced, first hand, personnel problems involving turnover, absenteeism, poor production, equipment abuse, and lack of motivation leading to lost revenues, accidents, and high insurance rates. At the same time market trends reveal that the demand for professional tree care services is on the rise. Sales within the industry are at an all time high with projections emphasizing increased growth.

What's an Arborist to do? Many of us have worked incredibly hard to build businesses with a strong reputation and a broad client base. We have studied and learned from experience about tree care, tree biology, and the business world. Our commitment and perseverance have been unwavering and we have inched forward from the sheer strength of determination. Now we are faced with problems of seemingly unprecedented magnitude. Simply stated, "just when the going's getting good, there's nobody to do the work!" And we are continuously being told of the gloom and doom of the future as the problems of finding, training & keeping good people become worse.

Instead of complaining and feeling sorry for ourselves, I suggest we meet these problems as challenges and face them head-on. We must embrace a positive perspective and focus on what can be done in a practical way to overcome the dilemma of hiring and keeping good quality professional field personnel. It is up to us as Managers to become creative in our thinking and to address issues with a fresh outlook to discover the answers and solutions which must be found. At the same time, we must be willing to take an honest look at ourselves and how we relate to our most valuable resource: People.

First, a few comments on the unique nature of 'people problems'.

- Arborist or Personnel Manager? I have yet to meet an Arborist who's background was in personnel management and then chose a career in tree care. Let's face it; we have a lot to learn. Most of our ideas about managing people came from our own experiences with previous bosses whom we don't work for anymore!

- If you can't see clearly, clean your glasses. It's easy to get locked into a narrow "tunnel vision" perspective, especially when dealing with employees. Attitudes, values, beliefs, and feelings are as varied as imaginable and everybody has them. Worse yet, we probably can't change what people feel or think. We must expand our vision and really understand what motivates people. As Managers, we must become sensitive, observe clearly, and react to what's really going on with our people, not what appears to be true on the surface.

- They don't make 'em like they used to. Today's employee is a new breed who wants and expects personal satisfaction and professional growth. Authoritarian managers are no longer tolerated. Old methods of management based on the philosophy of, "do it because I said so", don't work anymore. We must recognize employee perceptions, communicate with our people, manage job satisfaction and help fulfill personal values.

- Really good may be as perfect as it gets. The nature of people is complex and forever dynamic and changing. We may never be able to eliminate turnover or other personnel problems, but we can achieve a level of control. We can avoid surprises and the unexpected through careful management. We can achieve a comfort level which preserves our own sanity. We can create stability and depth within our organization from which real controlled growth can develop.

- Our biggest problem may be our greatest asset. If we have personnel problems as an industry,

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then so do our competitors. By resolving our own adversities, we can make the other guys problems worse! Who wouldn't mind getting a large contract because your competitor didn't have people to do the work? It makes sense to work hard to resolve a situation with such a tremendous payback!

Employee development is a step by step evolution through self-achievement. People are motivated when they find the opportunity to learn and grow, accomplish or achieve. When employees feel good about themselves and what they're doing, they'll naturally like their job. We must understand that all motivation is self-motivation. We can't motivate anyone; we can only inspire motivation in others. In the same way, we can't teach anyone anything; we can only help them learn for themselves. Learning is a process which develops through positive reinforcement. Fear is an obstacle to learning and the end to motivation. Employee development can only be achieved through positive encouragement.

We must understand our people, the learning process, and what motivation is all about. We must step back, allow our employees to be responsible, stand on their own, and fulfill their potential. We can only be there to guide and direct; we can't make it happen. Only with true understanding can we begin to address "people problems". On a practical level we must hire the right people, train them aggressively, inspire motivation, and encourage teamwork.

Many of our "people problems" begin with hiring mistakes. Production pressures may force us to hire the wrong people which results in turnover. The costs of turnover can be astronomical when we consider the lost training time invested in people who don't work out and the way turnover can undermine the attitude of otherwise outstanding employees. A lot can be learned from studying hiring mistakes to help develop a profile of who works out and who doesn't. Exit interviews provide feedback as to what went wrong. We have developed a few profiles of those that didn't work.

The Hot Shot. The guy who has done it all and worked for them all. Extremely cocky and not a team player.

Highest Bidder. Comes to you for more money and will leave for the same reason.

Need A Job. Over his head in expenses and

needs money fast. Says he will do anything but is in a hole and may pull you in with him.

Boss's Fault. Left his other jobs because he couldn't get along with the boss. He probably won't get along with you either.

Avoid creating your own problems by hiring the wrong people. Over ½ of our employee failures turned out to be hiring mistakes. We also developed a profile of the kind of people what did seem to work out well.

Career Oriented. Interested in working to earn a secure future.

Teachable Spirit. Shows an interest and willingness to learn.

Committed. Solid previous work history or educational background.

Competitive. Likes self-challenge and is team oriented. May have a background in sports or athletics.

Interest. Is excited about working outdoors as a tree climber.

A career in tree care has a lot to offer. It can be exciting and challenging. The variety of our work sparks an interest and prevents boredom. Just as the Marine Corp attracts the best by "looking for a few good men", we can expound on the glory and professionalism involved with tree care.

By being selective about hiring and making it difficult to qualify for a job, we can attract better people. Our candidates are subjected to a phone interview, a screening interview, and finally a staff interview before being hired. If selected they must endure an orientation day to review several training videos and become familiar with company policies, procedures and equipment before starting work. It is important to begin to lay the ground work for encouraging professionalism and a positive attitude with the first introduction to the industry and your firm.

Training is at the heart of an employee development program. Our businesses depend on having well-trained people. Our future and growth depends on adequate training. Training is an investment that will save money and provide returns many times over. A comprehensive training program involves the use of many different resources.

1. *Skills Checklist.* We must identify what we want employees to learn before we'll know what

to teach them. We have developed a Skills Checklist for each employee which follows a progression from the most fundamental skills, through basic climbing skills, and finally supervisory training skills. Each employee is given a notebook containing their checklist. As they master a skill it becomes the employee's responsibility to have their supervisor review their ability and check off the skill as proficient. This places the burden of responsibility for advancement and learning on the employee. It also enables people to grow and develop at their own individual pace.

2. *Evaluation.* Every 3 months, each new employee is reviewed to discuss their positive trends and to establish short term goals. Employees with over one year of service are reviewed every six months. Evaluations are necessary to track each individual's growth and to monitor training or motivational needs. It is important that pay raises not be correlated with evaluations as employees will become distracted from the true purpose of the evaluation.

3. *Supplemental Training.* The N.A.A. home study program provides an excellent means for furthering employee development. These programs are required as part of our skills checklist. Other training resources are readily available which concentrate on supervisory skills, client relations, job organization, first aid courses, etc. It may be desirable to send key employees to local skills seminars which may become available in your area to improve supervisory or management abilities.

4. *Training Seminar.* Every three months we schedule a ½ day training seminar which concentrates on a specific skill. Examples of topics covered have included pruning techniques, chain saw use, electrical hazards, cabling and bracing, aerial rescue, and emergency response. The seminars are conducted by in-house staff and supplemented with guest speakers and audio/visual educational programs. It may seem like a ½ day of lost production is a considerable expense but the return from organized training sessions far out-weighs the costs involved.

5. *Field Training.* Each week our designated training coordinator reviews the production schedule and targets training opportunities with specific employees according to their training

needs. He will spend several hours with a crew to work with those individuals identified to learn or review particular skills from their skills checklist.

6. *Supervisory Training.* Becoming an effective Crew Leader requires special abilities and training. Too often "good climbers" are simply assigned the task of directing a field crew with no input concerning how to manage people or deal effectively with a client. Every two weeks we schedule a ½ hour training discussion with our supervisors and supervisor trainees to review specific topics. Topics range from crew motivation and management to client relations, job set-up, equipment maintenance, and the leadership role. The format is loose with notes taken on an easel and compiled in a report for future reference.

Programs, policies, and procedures, no matter how well prepared, mean nothing if people aren't motivated to apply them. Managers must understand that their fundamental responsibility is to set the tone or flavor of the company. Strong leadership is vital for success. But what really motivates people? We as Managers must develop the sensitivity needed to discover and understand this for ourselves. A true and deep understanding of people is required to face with consistency and effectiveness that continuous onslaught and myriad of problems and situations which develop every day. Simply put, most people all basically want the same things; to be appreciated, respected, responsible, and provided with an environment to grow and develop. We must become sensitive to those needs and feelings and offer encouragement and support. We must reward positive efforts and create opportunities to learn and grow from mistakes. Criticism and punishment or management through fear is destructive. Real learning can only occur within a positive environment. We must inspire people and cultivate their thirst for self achievement and self worth.

But what can be done in a practical way to help provide motivation?

1. *The Players make up the team.* Everyone wants to feel like an important part of the team. We must encourage an attitude of mutual respect. Allow people to express their ideas and opinions and listen to them. Let your people direct and be responsible for their own advancement. Self expression can breathe life into a business. When

your people are included they become true resources. Continuously ask, "What do you think"?

2. *Challenge is needed for growth.* Establish goals on an individual basis. Develop a "road map" for career advancement for each person and offer guidance and support. Take a "hands off" approach where people accept challenges for themselves and can take pride in the rewards of accomplishment.

3. *It's never the way it looks.* Too often when analyzing a situation we look to the obvious as the cause of a problem. Step back and observe the big picture. Don't jump to conclusions prematurely. It's all too easy to deflate someone by placing the blame where it doesn't belong. Remember, most problems can be traced back to management. Nothing will destroy motivation faster than accusing others when the mistake is your own.

4. *Clean your own closet first.* Make the workplace comfortable and maintain first class equipment. Set an example for professionalism and allow your people to take pride in the company and whom they represent. Quality work begins with an organized and well maintained operations facility. Take a look at your operation through the eyes of your personnel. Would you like to work here?

5. *Let the Superstars shine.* Take every possible opportunity to reward positive efforts. Everyone wants to be recognized for outstanding performance in front of their peers. We have developed several awards designed to encourage

attendance, safety, learning and advancement, and efforts above and beyond what is expected. The awards are presented at our quarterly training seminar and include plaques, trophies, and prizes or specialty items.

To develop as a winning team, every player must work together towards the same goal. Each player is important and must assume responsibility for himself, be involved, and know his role and contribution. Attitudes filter down through the coach who must provide direction, strategy and positive encouragement. The players must receive credit and the rewards and glory for their individual performances. They must also be corrected when mistakes are made.

In the same way, running a successful business is a team effort. It takes time and consistent effort to build an effective workforce with the proper abilities and motivation. The challenge is there but so are the rewards of accomplishments.

We live in an ever changing world where we must adapt or face extinction just as in nature. We must accept a new breed of employee who may not respond to "Do it because I said so, or else"! Our people remain as our greatest potential asset or our greatest problem. It is up to each of us to develop the sensitivity and awareness required to not just survive but to move forward.

*Arboguard Tree Specialists
P.O. Box 461
Avondale Estates, Georgia 30002*