



Employing **Communication** in Employment

When you focus on your people, you increase the likelihood that other parts of your business will begin to fall into place.

By Brandi D. McNally

Most people who come to work for Tagawa don't know how to grow plugs; approximately 45 percent of its plug growers have been internally trained without any sort of horticulture background at all, and Tagawa loses less than five percent of them on a yearly basis. The other 55 percent are plug growers. For 60 percent of the employees hired with horticulture degrees, Tagawa is their first post-college job. The college-educated individuals typically only make a 3- to 5-year stay out of their career at Tagawa, with about 15-25 percent of them lost on a yearly basis. Vice President of Production Cindy Wieland acknowledges that this turnover is a challenge, but it doesn't deter Tagawa from continuing to hire graduates.

"It's really important that you have a way to advance them and you as a company have to know that your people are valuable. The question that people ask, and we hear this all the time, is 'Why hire them? You're just going to lose them in 3-5 years after all this energy and training you've put into them.'"

The reason has to do with long-term productivity versus short-term investment; with the efficiency of Tagawa's training program, they're able to have a plug supervisor covering 75,000 sq. ft. of plugs in 6-8 months. If they were instead to rely on an entry-level irrigator to complete this task, it would take five years of training to get to the supervisory level that a graduate is at in a scant 6-8 months, Wieland says. "We may lose 15-25 percent, but in the long haul, that's just part of doing business. We especially see that young people out of college have many ambitions and goals. These people are great implementers and learners, but they generally seek opportunity for



Tagawa's training program is so efficient that they can have an entry-level college graduate supervising 75,000 sq. ft. of plugs in 6-8 months.

There's a plug-growing operation in the Western United States where less than five percent of new employees actually have any plug experience upon hiring; where turnover of employees with horticulture degrees can be 15-25 percent per year; and yet, where over the past two years, yields have increased by four percent, oversow percentages have decreased by approximately 10 percent, and labor is down five percent. Furthermore, germination percentages have increased, transplanting is better and seed accuracy is better. It is also a place where employees understand what's expected of them on their first day on the job, where they take pride in their work and where they are eager to consume more knowledge. That place is Tagawa Greenhouses in Brighton, Colo.

Two years ago, Tagawa's owners saw that their production efficiency and product uniformity could be improved through some changes in employee training. By developing a system that integrated training, research and development, and implementation management, they've seen increasing productivity since the

beginning of the program. Hiring professional teachers, developing standardized procedures and spending time with individual employees to gain an understanding of their communication levels are just a few of the things they've done to make their training program successful.

MAKING SENSE OF TRAINING

New employees at Tagawa know within their first day of employment what the company's vision is for them, that they're going to go through a set of training programs and what their benefits are. Their first orientation session lasts for approximately one hour and guides them through all the basics. The second session fulfills the EPA's worker protection standard and was recreated in such a way as to command employees' attention and ensure that safety is at the forefront for all employees from day one. The third session, which is currently under development, deals with career paths. Trainers will open employees' eyes as to what kinds of opportunities are available to them at Tagawa. Employees will also be apprised of a bonus program in which they can earn financial rewards for achieving certain goals every month in this third session.

career advancement into management positions over time. If you don't have an opportunity they are looking for, and there is an opportunity in the industry for them, you want them to be able to pursue those possibilities." She believes that a company should desire success for its employees, even if they decide at some point to move on to other endeavors.

SUCCESS IS IN THE DETAILS

There are three tiers to the structure of Tagawa's training program that work in concert to help the company generate consistent-quality products for its customers. First, there's the research and development group, which focuses primarily on protocols and procedures, and then the training group. Both of these groups are integral to developing the systems that are going to be used in the greenhouse and communicating these systems to the employees. On the third level are the managers and supervisors who are responsible for integrating those systems into their greenhouse programs.

The training program itself has two levels, fundamental and advanced training, with a budget specifically allocated to the program. Fundamental training includes all the basics important for operating your greenhouse and producing consistent plants. It covers tray filling, tray movement, seed placement, irrigation techniques and anything that would be crucial for daily operations to be implemented successfully. Seven classes comprise the fundamental training, with three more to be taught in the near future, and they are generally completed within one month. Classes are kept within one hour.

Advanced training is geared toward supervisory and management roles. Examples of this training are research and development seminars, where the research and development team presents reports on the research they're doing — research that will become Tagawa's next protocols and procedures. They also receive advanced training in the form of outside speakers — people like Jerry Gorchels, Ann Chase, John Erwin, Dave Koranski and Ron Adams are

just a few of the well-known professionals who have given seminars at Tagawa.

The objective of this training structure, with multiple facilities and multiple plug growers, is to produce a consistent-quality product for Tagawa's customers. "Our customers want to receive a product that performs the same week after week. With multiple locations and growers, it is necessary that the product be treated similarly independent of its location. The product has to come out the same way, no matter where it comes from," Wieland explained.

Before Tagawa started its training program, it found its production teams were on different pages regarding growing the products. "We wanted to create a consistent expectation for our product and develop uniformity in production. In addition, we wanted to gain efficiencies in our operation by increasing yields and productivity. Through training specific techniques, we could implement standardized practices throughout the company. These were the initial reasons for starting the growing systems program," Wieland added.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

When Tagawa made the decision to take charge of its training program, it looked outside itself for answers — specifically, it sought someone whose professional trade it was to teach. It came up with an educational instructor who works for the Denver public school system, and who helped Tagawa understand the important components of education and of educating employees. Since more than 90 percent of Tagawa's employees speak Spanish, Tagawa knew it needed to write its manuals in both English and Spanish. It also learned that everything needed to be standardized, so it has one bilingual instructor who teaches the same information in every class.

Tagawa also became aware that it needed to consider employees' education levels in order for the training program to be truly effective. "Your fundamental training needs to be written for the average education level of your audience. We

found the best approach to be keeping the training at a junior high reading level. You can have a great training program for a highly educated audience, but your whole operation needs to understand you. The management only make up a small portion of your corporation and are not the majority of the doers who implement the practices everyday. Keeping it simple is necessary for repeatable success," Wieland explained.

One of the most important things the education instructor taught Tagawa is that people learn differently, so an effective class must employ different ways to learn, whether audio, visual or through the actual experience of doing the project. In any given class, they might integrate transparencies, visual aids or something for students to touch.

In most cases, seeing and experiencing the activity is the most useful method in training new people. In general, there are at most 10 individuals to a class and most classes require that they pass a test upon completion to be certified to conduct that activity in the greenhouse. After



Tagawa produced its own version of the EPA's worker protection video to make the message about on-the-job safety more effective.

Bernie Erven, Ph.D, is a professor and extension program leader in the Department of Agricultural, Environmental and Development Economics at The Ohio State University in Columbus, and researches human resource management in family businesses. In his publication, "Training New Employees," Erven says that employee instruction can be guided by the following 5-step teaching method:

1. **Prepare** the learner. Learners are prepared when they are at ease, understand why they need to learn the task, are interested in learning, have the confidence that they can learn and their trainer can teach. The most important part of learner

preparation is creating a need to know or desire to learn on the part of the trainee. It helps to show enthusiasm for the task; relate the task to what the learner already knows; help the learner envision being an expert in the task; have the learner explain how the task will relate to success in the business; add fun and prestige to the task when possible; and associate the task with respected co-workers.

2. **Tell** the learner about each step or part of the task.

3. **Show** the learner how to do each step or part of the task. In demonstrating the task, explain each step emphasizing the key points and more difficult steps. Remember the little and seemingly simple

parts of the task. Get the learner involved by asking questions about what is being shown.

4. Have the learner **do** each step of the task while being observed by the trainer and then without the trainer observing. Ask the learner to explain each step as it is performed. If steps or parts of steps are omitted, re-explain the steps and have the learner repeat them.

5. **Review** each step or part of the task with the learner, offering encouragement, constructive criticism and additional pointers on how to do the job. Be frank in appraisal. Encourage the learner toward self-appraisal.

successful completion of the test, the employee receives a certificate of achievement.

Tagawa's fundamental trainer is an occupational therapist by trade and doesn't have any background in horticulture. The important thing is that she can work well with people and understands how different people respond to training. Her goal is to make sure that the people are able to implement the standardized techniques trained.

As far as challenges Tagawa has encountered in revamping its training process, Wieland says there are two. First, in a large operation, there are many facilities and many different opinions on the best way to accomplish things. "It comes down

to deciding the best method for your company. There may be 50 different great ways to get there, but for you to produce a consistent product, you need to decide on one corporately. If a variable changes, then you know which variable is outside the procedure and can understand how to respond. When everyone is initiating different protocols, it is difficult to manage all of the changes. It is important that everyone is doing similar procedures," she said. Second, she says that usually existing employees are more difficult to train than new employees. The existing people have adapted to growing a specific way and are comfortable with their methods. "Changing to a new technique or method takes time,

it does not happen overnight. And even though you wish it wouldn't happen, people will revert back to old habits," Wieland said.

POSITIVE GAINS

Tagawa has experienced some fairly significant gains since implementing this training program two years ago. It has increased yields by two percent per year, which can be interpreted as two percent less being spent on costs and two percent more product available for sales. It has decreased its oversow percentages by 9-10 percent and is spending less in upfront seed costs for transplanting trays.

"A lot of the different programs that we've put together are paying off," Wieland said. "Our labor is down by five percent; this has occurred in part because of a bonus program that provided management with a tool to promote increased efficiencies and productivity. With strong site-management leadership, the corporation is greatly benefiting from programs the managers have implemented to decrease labor costs and increase productivity."

Wieland has even gotten positive feedback from growers. One grower told her he likes the training classes

because they give people an idea of what to expect when they come into the greenhouse. He also commented that before the training programs, no one knew what irrigation guidelines to follow. Now that the programs are in place, he said, everyone knows what to do.

Beyond plugs, Tagawa has also seen improvements on the finished side of its business, though Wieland is unable to quantify that improvement at this time. "We anticipate a 15-percent increase in fall asters due to sell-through this year. I can't quantify it much better than that."

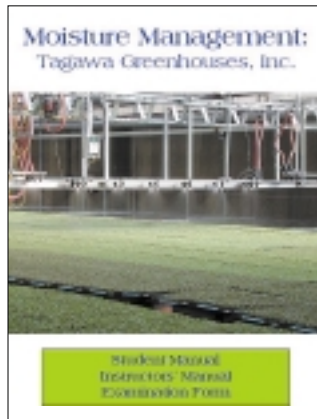
That's enough to convince anyone that investing in employee training is worth the time, money and effort it takes to make it successful. **GPN**

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Left: Tagawa Greenhouses' Moisture Management training manual; Right: Tagawa's shipping team receiving certificates for completing the moisture management class.