



THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON THE BUS

A post-recession climate can raise uncertainty in your business, but one thing is for sure. There's no better time than now to invest in your employees.

BY CHARLIE HALL

As a frequent traveler, I am always amazed at the sundry of experiences that air travel offers. I see examples of incredibly poor service and I see examples of outstanding service; the former more so than the latter, unfortunately. I have found that when you have someone treat you in an especially courteous or helpful or out-of-the ordinary way, you remember it.

Sometimes you are even moved to write down the person's name and send an e-mail to the airline about how special that person is and how they made your travel experience different from the norm that day. Other times, well let's not go there.

I wish I could say that when I visit greenhouse operations that I only interact with outstanding people who seem to be highly motivated, who seem to enjoy what they are doing, and who seem to want to be different. But, sadly, that is not the case.

Don't get me wrong. There are some very talented people running some very successful greenhouse operations out there. But even those who seem to be doing things right still struggle with getting the right people on the bus — getting everyone on the "team" to communicate, adhere to SOPs, and get serious about COEs without pointing the blame at someone else all the time. Sound familiar?

Those whom I have talked to about these problems often ask: *Why is this? How can this be? Why can't we get every single employee in our business to be as motivated as I am?*

The first part of the answer lies in the deceptive assumption underlying the question. The truth is, we can't motivate our employees. It is simply not within our power to motivate someone other than ourselves.

To see my point, just think about your own reaction when someone

says to you "You should..." — fill in the blank with anything; it doesn't really matter. It's just human nature to bristle a bit when we hear those words. They connote that we are not doing something that someone else thinks we should or we should be doing a task in a different way than we are currently.

What does work, however, in getting folks to perform is to incentivize them. Rewarding the proper performance almost guarantees that the desired behavior will be repeated. But please realize that I am not just talking about paying people more. Money is a short-term extrinsic motivator. Simply paying people more to do a job does not incentivize them. It will stimulate higher productivity in the short-term, but HR research shows that performance will approach the previous state after a surprisingly short period of time.

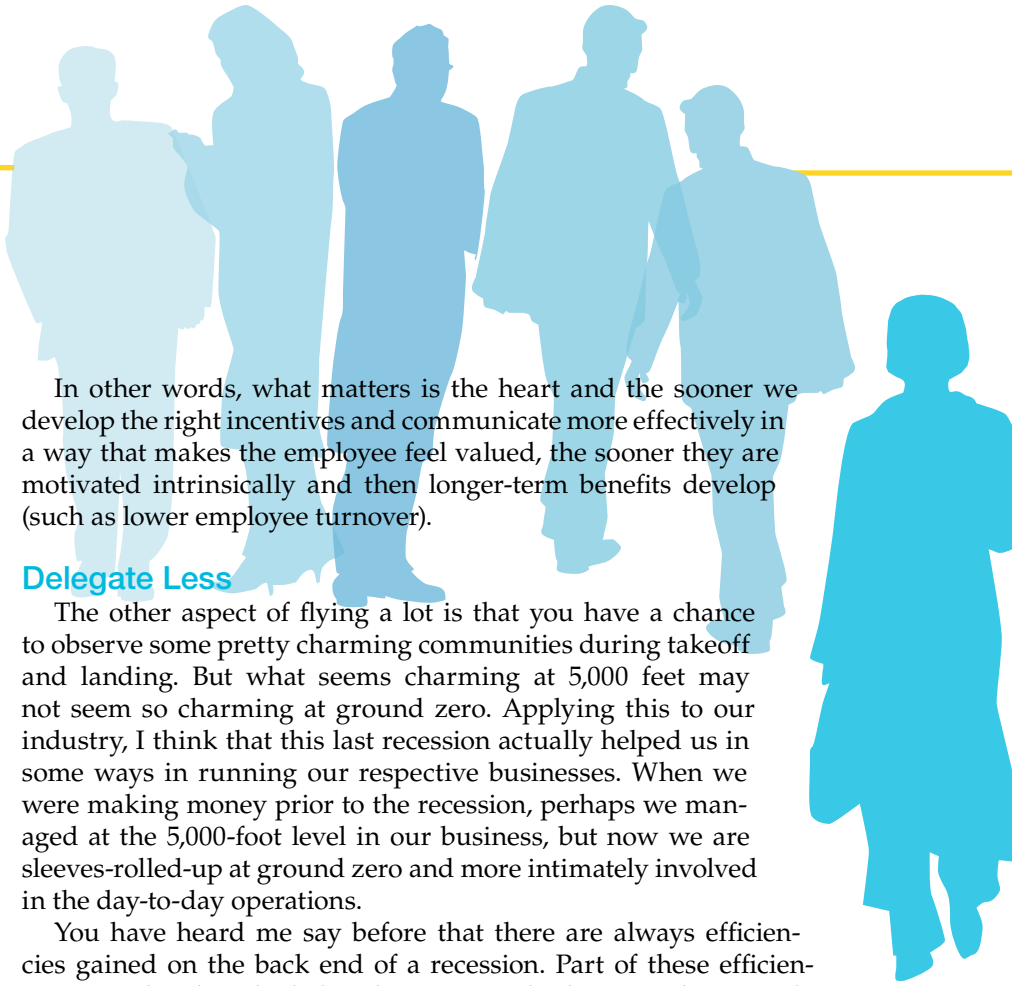
Encourage Long-Term Performance

Intrinsic incentives, however, cause long-term and often permanent changes in behavior. Most job satisfaction surveys reveal that the most important aspects that employees desire in their job is for it to be challenging and stimulating, that they receive adequate training to do the job right, that they are recognized for a job well done, that the work they are doing is valued by

upper management, and to feel that their job is truly making a difference for the business they are working for. Notice that none of these have anything to do with money.

Let's face it though. Not every task in the greenhouse is what we would consider mentally challenging. Policies and procedures are important, yes, but they don't get to the heart of the matter.

"WHEN STUDYING ECONOMIC TRENDS ... GROWERS MUST NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, LET WHAT THEY HEAR ON THE NEWS SHAPE THEIR STRATEGIC THINKING. READ INCESSANTLY AND SYNTHESIZE FROM SEVERAL DIFFERENT SOURCES."



In other words, what matters is the heart and the sooner we develop the right incentives and communicate more effectively in a way that makes the employee feel valued, the sooner they are motivated intrinsically and then longer-term benefits develop (such as lower employee turnover).

Delegate Less

The other aspect of flying a lot is that you have a chance to observe some pretty charming communities during takeoff and landing. But what seems charming at 5,000 feet may not seem so charming at ground zero. Applying this to our industry, I think that this last recession actually helped us in some ways in running our respective businesses. When we were making money prior to the recession, perhaps we managed at the 5,000-foot level in our business, but now we are sleeves-rolled-up at ground zero and more intimately involved in the day-to-day operations.

You have heard me say before that there are always efficiencies gained on the back end of a recession. Part of these efficiencies are related to the belt-tightening we do during tight times, but more importantly, I think they result from our being more hands-on with the intimate details of the business. We delegate less and are more involved in the affairs of the business.

We also pay a lot more attention to the state of economic affairs in the wake of troubled times. I have been quite pleased with the quality of questions I have received from growers over the past five years. It indicates that they are at least reading more or paying more attention to economic news being disseminated.

One word of caution, however, when studying economic trends — it's important to know enough to know the difference. Growers must not, under any circumstances, let what they hear on the news shape their strategic thinking. Read incessantly and synthesize from several different sources.

Uncertainty that stems from a post-recession climate yields hesitancy in some, but it also represents a time of opportunity. We have access to some very cheap money right now, so if there are strategic investments that need to be made, there will be no better time to do so. Of course, getting the right people on the bus and investing in them makes very good strategic sense right now as well. ■

Charlie Hall is Ellison Chair in International Floriculture in Texas A&M University's department of horticulture. He can be reached at charliehall@tamu.edu.

BIG GROWER | inside the box

► continued from page 14

on training them to be the best they can be at helping customers. Employee and customer interaction are key for success.

6. Network with other businesses

Businesses simply cannot survive on their own. It is critical to network within both your industry as well as community.

7. Price flexibility

Research shows that price can be a driver. Businesses with price flexibility will continue to grow. This is not to be confused with discounting. This really refers to creative special offers and everyday special values.

8. Seasonality has reappeared

Retailers have re-embraced the seasons and are using it as a marketing opportunity.

9. Consolidation will continue

That means there will be fewer businesses that do what you are doing. Those businesses that survive will be stronger and will be in place to take advantage of the market.

Some Basic Fundamentals

As I reflect on our many friends and clients in the industry, I am reminded of where they started. Most of them have roots that reach back to a family business. In working with family businesses some of the fundamentals have not changed and it's important that we reflect on them as well:

- Treat all employees as family. It will result in everyone working well together for the benefit of all and towards a common goal.
- Never compromise family values.
- Understanding the value of customer service and if we take care of our business,

the business will take care of the family and employees.

- Provide personal service.
- Appreciate and nourish longstanding customer relationships.

Last, I am reminded of an acronym that I heard a speaker share many years ago:

VIRTUE — Vision, Integrity, Respect, Understanding, Excellence.

Maybe a goal for 2013?

I hope you will enjoy your holidays and I hope you will take the time to reflect on your business. ■

Dave Edenfield is president of Visions Group LLC, a solutions group providing marketing, management and production assistance to the green industry. He can be reached at dave@visionsgroupllc.com.