

TALENT: YOUR TRUEST ASSET



Do you know how to find it and (more importantly) keep it?

BY LAUREN SNYDER

Plant identification is a skill, not a talent. A degree is a qualification, not a talent. Too often in the green industry the focus rests on skills and qualifications, rather than innate abilities that cannot be taught or trained but make up the difference between a mediocre employee and a superstar.

These types of “soft skills” are the foundation for long-term employee success: attention to detail, sound judgement, emotional intelligence, work ethic, positive outlook, strong self-awareness, flexibility, organization, drive, humility, humor, curiosity ... The list goes on.

Identifying and finding the right talent for the right position is one step; retaining that talent is another.

While the solution is never going to be the same for each individual business, there are key factors and techniques that go beyond pay alone. Bridget Behe, professor at Michigan State University who teaches business and marketing and has seen three decades of industry talent in her classroom, observes, “We try to stay current with insect and disease issues and new genetics and growing techniques. But we have not done as well to stay current with ways to keep our people happy, profitable and productively employed.”

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Where do you start to build a talented team? Research shows to begin with your managers. In a study done by the Gallup Organization and then published in the popular book “First Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently,” more than 1 million employees were interviewed over the course of 25 years to attempt to analyze what makes some companies successful and others not so much. Researchers concluded that while company structure and set-up is important, *what is even more important is the relationship between employees and their immediate manager.*

Good managers are as much a function of innate talent as they are of training. Research shows that a manager’s greatness comes from an ability to tune into other people and turn their talents into performance.

Good managers don’t worry about controlling and melding employees into the people they

want them to be. They instead recognize that people don’t change all that much and learn to work with what’s there to bring out the best in people.

Lindsey Kerr, garden manager and curator at Lord & Schryver Conservancy in Salem, Oregon, shared her experience with how good managers tune into their employees, “A good manager demonstrates active listening. Active listening makes a world of difference in making an employee feel valued and appreciated. They also recognize that younger employees especially are learning how to communicate effectively and respectfully and may sometimes fail. They don’t rush to take offense or get defensive when an employee is upset or complains. They use conversations as opportunities to demonstrate communication and leadership skills. Finally, the best managers make their employees feel like they are seen as real people, not just a pair of hands. They acknowledge that employees are doing their best, that they need positive reinforcement, and that they have lives outside of work.”

RIGHT PERSON, RIGHT PLACE

Once you have the right managers in place, let them loose in building their dream team for the job you need done. Paul Westervelt, annual and perennial production manager at Saunders Brothers in Piney River, Virginia, says about his management philosophy, “I want to empower my team to make their own decisions and their own mistakes — but small ones. When you make a mistake, learn from it. I want to help my team see what needs done, learn the priority of what needs done when, and let them loose to do it.”

When it comes to hiring talent and the right people for his team, Westervelt goes on to say, “There’s too much focus on horticulture degrees. I just need someone who wants to do the job — I can teach the horticulture part. Our last hire was very quiet, but her interview and references revealed she had the sharp attention to detail we needed. That was more valuable than the degrees held by the other candidates. She’s such a good fit that I thank her almost every day for being here.”

Stephanie Whitehouse, retail general manager at Dickman Farms in Auburn, New York, has a

systematic method for building her team each year. It involves careful analysis of the key players and full-time people already in place, any major gaps in various departments, and areas where they hope to grow the company. She says, “I look for personalities that jive with who we already have and the skills we’re missing.”

Whitehouse continues, “I look for people who have played sports or have been in the service or foodservice industries. Those are the people who can work in teams and are used to a fast-paced environment and who can think on their feet.”

In every interview, Whitehouse asks two questions consistently: 1) Give an example of both your favorite and least favorite managers; and 2) What’s your favorite plant?

The first question provides insight into how well a candidate might handle constructive criticism, as well as insights into how they like to be managed and how they see themselves in a team. The second question let’s Whitehouse know whether they might have some passion and interest in plants — and it’s just fun to know. In fact, she’s never gotten the same answer twice.

Despite her best efforts up front during the hiring process, sometimes an employee isn’t a homerun ... at least not right away. Whitehouse describes a situation where a woman with all the right talents, skills and experience was hired. It became evident, though, that she was far from happy in the position she was hired for. She was stressed, anxious and came into work looking miserable. The pressure of high-stakes projects was stifling this employee’s passion and abilities — and affecting the rest of the team.

Instead of blaming the employee for not working out, Whitehouse moved her to a different position on the company’s garden center sales floor. Whitehouse relates, “It made more sense immediately. She excelled in the sales role. Her talent for organization means that retail stays clean and the benches are well ordered. And now she can also use her plant knowledge for customers’ immediate needs without the stress she felt for more long-term projects in a production job. Her demeanor and happiness has done a 180 and has affected everyone else on the team. When she’s excited

and happy to come into work, other people pick up on that.”

RETAINING TALENT

In an informal survey of industry professionals done for this article, the factors that make an employee stay in a job are 1) the work itself, 2) opportunity for growth and advancement, and tied for third 3) interpersonal relationships and salary.

The survey also revealed that the biggest factors for job satisfaction were employees enjoyed the work they did, felt a sense of achievement and purpose in doing that work, had good work/life balance, had opportunities to grow and advance, and finally, that they were empowered to do what they needed to do to get the job done.

Staying at a job is one thing; being satisfied with a job is another. Employers that cultivate a positive environment of empowerment, appreciation and growth are more likely to hang on to passionate and talented employees.

Whitehouse agrees. She shares her experience of friends and colleagues who have left the green industry, “If the job they’re working in doesn’t build upon their excitement, passion and desire for learning and growth, they leave. The job wasn’t giving them the opportunity to cultivate their passion. An employer needs to consciously fuel that fire if they want to hang on to talented and passionate employees.”

Once you have the environment that allows a person’s passion to thrive, management (indicated in the survey as “interpersonal relationships”) also

plays a significant role in retaining talent. Behe adds, “People don’t quit jobs. They quit people. It all goes back to ‘how you interact with and treat me.’”

One survey respondent put it simply, “Managers who are enthusiastic, organized, thoughtful, good listeners, and yet expecting of excellence, make a work place a joy.”

Yet another shared, “I think a manager/boss can make or break a company. In my experience, if there was poor management, I hated going to work. When there was great management and support, I loved going to work. I also just like being outdoors!”

Another commenter observed, “I think there is sometimes too much emphasis on sales goals and profit when considering people for advancement. You need these things to stay in business, but I think more emphasis should be placed on identifying people who will be good managers and leaders and not just on who has the highest sales.”

THE TRUE TREASURE

We say it often enough — horticulture is not always glamorous, but it is rewarding. Nothing beats a morning sunrise over bays and bays of beautiful plants. There’s something almost primal in our industry’s responsibility to cultivate life, and it’s not something that’s easily taught. It’s felt in the heart, and the most passionate employees radiate that joy day in and day out.

A passionate, talented employee is a true treasure. As such, they should be nurtured. One

survey respondent shared, “My employer works to make me feel valued. I’m not a warm body to them. I’m part of the company’s present and future. That makes me want to retire here, and I’m at least 30 years from retiring.”

Another commented, “Taking care of good employees instead of taking advantage of them will make them want to stay with a good company. If employees feel as though the company is devoted to them, they will be devoted to you.”

Employees are people, not mere functions of accomplishing to-do lists, sales goals and bottom lines. The best companies keep this reality at the forefront of their hiring and management strategies. They also recognize that each person has unique talents, and they tune into the best applications of those talents.

Seeing talent, appreciating talent and letting that talent thrive are the hallmarks of great companies. These companies work hard at getting out of a talented employee’s way, while diligently providing opportunities for growth, learning and joy.

As Paul Westervelt put it, “I love what I’m doing and the people I’m doing it for.”

That right there is hitting the nail on the head. ■

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