

Mitigating Risk in the 'TIME OF COVID'

By emphasizing preparedness and planning, Loma Vista Nursery has been able to address the unique challenges facing the industry.

BY SUE MARKGRAF

Safety and security are the foundation of business. Crises like COVID-19 and other environmental challenges illuminate weaknesses and strengths — while providing fertile ground for reflection, education and change.

Like many companies that have weathered environmental storms throughout their history, Loma Vista Nursery hones its business practices through leadership, experience and planning, and seizes challenge as an opportunity to pivot and poise for growth.

"The plan we made for 2020 was not created on Jan. 1," says Lyndsi Oestmann, president of the 310-acre wholesale container production facility in Ottawa, Kansas.

"Our production plan is a five-year rolling plan," Oestmann says. "Our sales plan is updated at least twice a year, and influences plans for production, labor, etc."

Staying nimble — through business projections and streamlining processes and procedures to eliminate risk — ensures all aspects of the business are driven from the sales plan. When the environment changes, the sales plan adapts, and all other aspects of the business follow suit.

"Successful business leaders are able to bend, sway and grow from challenge and uncertainty," she says, "rather than allow outside forces to dictate, debilitate and damage. Security is based on experience and is born from confident leadership that homes in on processes and procedures that get straight to the point for the business, team and customer. Leadership's ability to learn from experience and make sound business decisions, often swiftly, reinforces security and nurtures safety."

PRIORITIZING SAFETY, MANAGING RISK

At Loma Vista Nursery, safety measures are prioritized, supported by ownership and management, and communicated to every member of the team through training, reinforcement and daily engagement. Oestmann says that safety is a mindset, routine and habit, with every employee knowing they have the



The COVID-19 outbreak is forcing employees to do their jobs in new ways like working remotely from home.



Face masks are the new normal when team members must work in close proximity.



MANAGEMENT

Loma Vista Nursery relocated its break and lunchroom into a larger area to allow for social distancing.



By making safety a top priority, the employees and the company are both protected.

complete support of leadership in performing their daily work.

"Most safety issues are caused by unsafe behaviors and not unsafe conditions, so we positively reinforce safe practices, proactively, daily and measure," she says. "Because of COVID, we now have several other behaviors we are reinforcing, including the use of face masks when working in areas where face covering is deemed necessary and practicing safe distancing 6 feet apart or greater when working in groups or in an area with others."

Supervisors are required to complete weekly safety observation cards, documenting where and how desired protocols are being met and where they may need to be improved. This allows management to reinforce proper behaviors and redirect or correct those that are unsafe.

Employee training also looks a little different. Training is now done in small group sessions rather than as larger "tailgate trainings." Last

year, Loma Vista Nursery began using a software platform called Risk Management Center, provided by IMA Corp., its insurance broker.

Safety modules enable managers to assign training and due dates according to specific employee needs. Training is completed in both English and Spanish. Through PowerPoint, video and online articles, modules include lessons on a variety of relevant safety and security topics, from sexual harassment prevention for supervisors and employees to how to safely drive a 15-passenger van. Testing is at the end of the session, and completion is documented to prove that training occurred.

"Having clearly defined roles and job descriptions and training programs already in place — and allowing middle managers and our supervisor to lead and hold staff accountable — allows us to continue to operate with confidence, trust and transparency through our 'new normal'," Oestmann says. "We know everyone is doing

“When the environment changes, **the sales plan adapts**, and all other aspects of the business follow suit.

everything in their control to protect the health and safety of our team members and our business."

As one of the first in the industry to receive Systems Approach to Nursery Certification (SANC) a few years ago, applying the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during COVID made a lot of sense to Oestmann and her team "because it is a lot like how we treat our plants under SANC," she says. "The first step in becoming a SANC nursery was conducting a risk assessment and identifying our critical access points for disease and pests, and then creating a strategy to mitigate the risk. We are doing pretty much the same thing in how we are handling COVID-19."

On a logistics level, Loma Vista Nursery's staff and managers relocated their break and lunchroom to allow for safe distancing for essential workers on-site. They also maximized the real-time functionalities of the company's mobile communications app, called Paylocity Payroll Software Community Message Board.

"Last year, we started using the app for remote clock-ins/clock-outs, vacation requests and approvals and employee recognition," Oestmann says. "We use the message board to provide updates to the team and reiterate information that is covered in safety trainings. The app is an amazing tool that helps us improve communications across the company. For example, we provided detailed explanations in Spanish to our H2A visa workers on our county's shelter-in-place order,



Hand washing stations out in the field help fight the spread of the coronavirus.

state and national health guidelines and team member expectations for COVID-19 response. The app also provides security for our company by documenting how we are protecting our business and employees."

MANAGING WORKFLOW

Microsoft Teams ensures the company's seamless operation of day-to-day workflow and ongoing projects. Oestmann says not everyone was thrilled when the company began using the project management platform last winter.

"I'm glad everyone committed to trying it," she says. "We set up folders for each aspect of our business and corresponding teams. We use the video conferencing, chat, channels and shared files capabilities to communicate seamlessly and consistently. We have staff members working remotely and we are not all getting together in the break room anymore to do our weekly meeting. This has everything we need in one place."

Team member communications and achieving necessary buy-in to use provided tools ensures the safety and security of the company and its staff. Excellent communications and connectedness among team members is key to cultivating a new normal during COVID, says Oestmann, who also frequently checks in verbally with managers and supervisors.

As business owners across the country are learning, navigating "Life in the Time of COVID" is an ongoing, daily task in decision making.

"When COVID first happened, I spent many sleepless nights worrying about how to keep our team members healthy while maintaining productivity and meeting revenue and production goals," Oestmann says. "But experience tells me that you can have a back-up plan for what you cannot control and mitigate risks that are within your control. I know every decision I make is not going to be perfect, but when I rely on the core values of the company to guide my decisions, I am able to live with the outcomes." ■

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