

The horticulture industry needs more leaders to lead us into the future. To develop these new leaders, it is imperative both companies and individuals work together to establish career goals and a path for development.

Who Wants to Be President?

BY TODD DOWNING

Do you have a specific career vision of being the president of a company someday? Are you working on adding professional skill sets that will enable you to take on a C-Level role? Do you have a career dream? As a company, have you invested in a definitive training and development program aimed at developing your next leaders?

The horticultural industry needs more leaders now and progressively into the future. The number of retirements upcoming in the green industry is staggering. Did you know there are over 100 owners of companies retiring soon who have no clear leader to succeed them?

Overall, 60% of the professionals in the agriculture industry are over 55. As an industry, we endured a period with historically low numbers of students and professionals interested in pursuing a green industry career. This period has created a talent gap in what would often be considered the next traditional leadership group. This group is talented and knowledgeable, but it is merely a matter of supply and demand. There are just not enough leaders to take over. And not enough have been provided leadership training.

Throughout every sector, demographic and role in the green industry, there are too few individuals who have had a specific desire and career focus to run a company. Compare this to the financial sector or software sectors where a high volume of professionals have an early passion and focus on driving their careers to the top leadership roles in their industry. It is surprising how few professionals in our industry have had an initial desire to be a president of a company.

A dynamic affecting this is the sheer number of family-held companies where leadership has traditionally been passed to second or third generations. While this is admirable, it has also tempered the career aspirations of those who are not part of the family. We are now at a tipping point where there are fewer generations to pass leadership roles to, causing new and challenging exit planning options for the current leaders.

A MUTUAL EFFORT

Question: How do we address this predicament?

Answer: From the mutual effort of individuals and companies.

Encourage students and early career professionals to dream and envision being a company leader. Leadership is not for the faint of heart with all its responsibilities and challenges. However, we need more professionals to dream about wanting to run a company. Ask yourself: have you allowed yourself to dream about this type of role? To have more leaders, we need more professionals desiring to take on this level of leadership.

With that desire comes the awareness that one needs to embrace continual learning with curiosity and accept certain sacrifices that driving their career to top leadership will require. This could include putting in longer hours some days, the ability to relocate as necessary, and volunteering to take on new tasks or help in other departments when they are short-handed.

Academically the technical knowledge of plants and cultivation is essential. We have many excellent educational institutions producing knowledgeable students. Increase focused programs on developing leadership with curriculums geared to business and management. We rightly celebrate our grower interns, but we should also celebrate those doing horticulture industry internships in sales, marketing, accounting or human resources.

HAVE A PLAN

If you do want to take the helm of a company someday, identify in yourself the knowledge and skill sets you need to master, so you are ready. Proactively take charge of gaining the knowledge and experience you lack rather than relying on others.

There is as much onus on companies to be a part of increased leadership development. Yes, this does require an investment. Begin to balance your team's professional development with your automation budget. No matter how automated, it still takes strong professionals for a company to realize success.

Many assessment tools are available that will help a company identify individuals with leadership behaviors. These tools identify a career plan for those individuals that will infuse them with the skill sets needed to become a strong leader in the future.

Does your company have career development planning, which includes rotation through different departments or functions? At the very least, does the company invest in continual education or training programs focused on improving communication, soft skills, sales, marketing, financial, operations or supply chain knowledge?

Encourage and support these professionals to become active within the industry via associations, seminars or other educational and networking events. Don't be afraid of losing this talent by this exposure.

Professionals who know their company is investing fully in their growth are much less likely to leave. Employees who feel stifled in their development will leap at the chance for growth elsewhere.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

No company has an endless budget, but a company can apply strategies that do not require a monetary investment — transparency in your business and delegation of responsibilities. Openness with your employees about all facets of the business directly correlates to increasing their professional growth. For example, companies applying the "Great Game of Business" approach to transparency have more engaged and motivated employees concerning their career progression.

Pairing high potential employees with positive mentors also will benefit the mentor themselves increasing organizational talent

strength. Encourage delegating responsibilities and not micro-managing those assigned these tasks. This must start from the highest leadership levels. Current leaders ask yourself if too many business decisions are run through you, or have you honestly delegated to your team decisions without hovering over them? FYI — your business's valuation increases when delegating decision making and becoming less owner-centric.

Growing the number of leaders is critical to the future success of the entire industry. The gap can be closed with more professionals who desire to run a company and put their plan in place. Couple this with companies providing increased focus on training and development, and we have set the stage for increased industry success that becomes sustainable for many years to come. ■

Todd Downing (tdowning@bhccgroup.com) is a managing partner for Best Human Capital Advisory Group and leads the Horticulture & Green Industry executive search and advisory services. He has more than 30 years of experience in the industry and a passion for supporting its continued professional growth.

As an industry, we endured a period with historically low numbers of students and professionals interested in pursuing a green industry career.