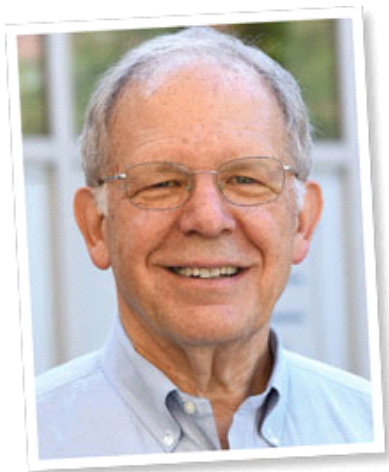


7/1/2021

Youthful Insights We Can Use

Bill McCurry



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As a judge for the *Green Profit*/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award, I've had the privilege of interviewing each of the finalists for an hour. Below you'll find a sampling of their thoughts on the most common industry frustration—personnel. The ideas below are in their words.

Esmeralda Carrasco, VP of Operations, Ponderosa Cactus Nursery (Tucson, Arizona); Age 24

I ask my team, "What's preventing you from being great today?" Employees are already great. The words you use can focus the positive and optimistic energies for mutual problem solving.

"What's preventing you ..." says management who wants to remove obstacles. Something simple like that shows the leader actually does care about the team. Companies become more innovative, more creative and

make a more positive environment by never saying, "What's wrong with you today?" The word "wrong" sends negative energy towards the employee.

When you create a meeting where you lay down the values of the business and create values with your team members, you're able to build a caring environment where they actually feel comfortable speaking up and expressing their ideas. They don't have all the answers, but they do have many answers because they're the ones doing the work. You're able to build a compassionate environment where the team feels comfortable speaking up and expressing their ideas without judgment.

Once the team leader shows they care, then they're able to really create incredible and sustainable solutions.

Ponderosa values family time. We provide more vacation days for our employees than most garden centers because we know they'll burn out unless they can spend extended time clearing their heads. We're a small business trying to find new avenues to make sure all of our employees are treated like family because we are family.

I plan on growing Ponderosa to connect more with the community. In our gift shop, we have vendors from different local start-up companies. These vendors feel comfortable with the space we provide them and we'll establish more farmers market-style pop-ups.

I owe almost everything to my parents. By building a better team and community at Ponderosa, I honor their leadership.

Wyatt Page, Garden Center Assistant Manager, Gill Garden Center + Landscape Co. (Corpus Christi, Texas); Age 25

Our company culture is a big part of retaining employees. It's hard work, but it's a fun place. We always preach being respectful and kind to everybody. People feel good when they work for us. Luckily, we've been able to retain almost all of our staff.

We don't have employee reviews. We call those sessions a "check-in." When we have a new employee, we do check-ins at two, four and eight weeks on the job. They're our way of making sure the person is feeling good and living our core values, which are: team, quality of work, service, fun, passion, respect, improvement and ownership.

We never say, "You better shape up or you're out." We don't want to start with a threat. Instead, it's a chance to communicate, tell the employee what a great job they're doing and, if warranted, point out some things that need improvement.

We also give our employees the opportunity to tell us how they're feeling and if there are any new things they want to learn. Employees want to be heard. This process gives them that opportunity, while giving management a chance to make them happy.

Especially with the younger generations, it's so important you confirm what they're doing is right and helping out. People want to feel they're doing a good job and contributing. It doesn't create a good culture if someone's doing everything they can and it's going unnoticed.

I always try to teach good customer service, especially during my "huddles." I get everybody's attention before we open every morning instead of taking ourselves away from customers. I try to keep huddles short. They're 10 to 15 minutes maximum. They give me an opportunity to get my employees ready for the day. We talk about what trucks are unloading. We talk about new plants coming in, as well as the old plants. What do customers want and what questions are they asking? It's a chance to educate and update. This is how we learned about the tussock moth caterpillar outbreak in the south Texas oak trees. Employees heard it from customers and we talked about it in the huddle. All my employees understood right then what to sell to solve customers' infestation.

I encourage everyone to contribute because the new employee who's recently joined us always brings a new perspective. If I haven't heard from an employee in a while, I'll say, "Can you give us a talk about roses tomorrow?" That gives them the day before to think about it. It's not a speech. I assure them, "If you're not comfortable talking, just ask a question." When you ask the group, "How do I care for roses?" it gives everyone else a chance to jump in. Someone will say, "Well, I do this or I do that." Together we always get points and a lot of diversity on how to care for roses because everybody does it differently.

Jesse Jenkins is a great general manager. Jesse has built this team. His expectation is quality work and he demands a lot of his employees. If any of us is struggling, he's always there to help us find a way to get it done. That's super helpful. And he's always so respectful and professional. That makes a great GM.

Terra Campbell, Greenhouse Department Head & Greenhouse Buyer, Round Rock Garden Center (Round Rock Texas); Age 22

Our big customer volume results in a very stressful time for our employees. I'm always checking with them, trying to make sure they're feeling good. As a manager I do whatever I can to help them. When they're doing well and feel comfortable it makes our customers feel at home.

Some employees are high schoolers who want to study horticulture in college. They want to dip their toes in and see how they like it. Some come from high school and end up staying here. Thanks to our owner, Jeff Ramert, we have

more longer-term employees. Jeff knows the worth of his team. When people leave an employer, it's not that they don't want the job, it's usually that they feel they're not getting paid what they're worth or not getting the appreciation they feel they deserve.

I was very unorganized when I was younger. Thanks to my sister's help I learned the value of being very organized. I understand that when you're late it shows the other person you don't respect their time. I want to make sure people know I do respect their time and am looking forward to our meeting. To be on time, I suggest employees leave 10 minutes early. That way if there's traffic or something goes wrong, they have extra wiggle room.

If employees like what they're doing, they like where they're going every day. They're not dreading it. They respect their coworkers so they want to be here and they want to get here on time.

I'm really lucky. Emily, my assistant, is the most amazing person. She helps me with everything. I definitely couldn't do anything without her. I'm very blessed. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.

Like you, I won't know the winner of the award until it's announced July 12 at Cultivate'21. We'll all find out together at Unplugged, starting at 8:00 p.m. this year at a new location: Gaswerks, 487 Park Street, Columbus. See you there!