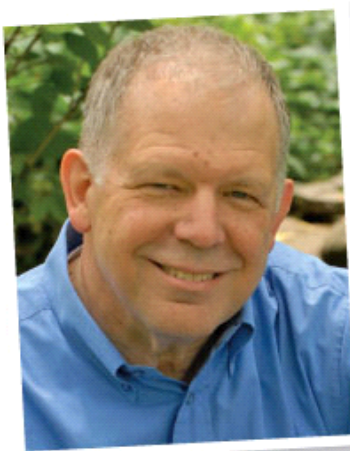


Columns

7/31/2017

The People Business

Bill McCurry



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I'm often corrected when I categorize The Garden Center Group as a "buying group." I'm told they don't do joint buying. I suggest that's not accurate. True, they don't buy truckloads of peat moss or flowers. However, they do contract with very smart people so they can provide actionable information to garden centers at a more economical rate than any individual company could. Isn't that the definition of a buying group?

This arrangement allows these resources to better understand the critical quirks of our industry. Through working with dozens of garden centers, these subject matter experts have become even better at what they do.

Jean Seawright has been a service provider to The Garden Center Group since 1999. Garden center operators often admit that hiring and keeping staff members are their biggest problems. I called Jean for advice and she made five great points immediately.

1. Recruit aggressively. Fewer people today want hard work or physical labor. You must paint an enticing picture of your workplace, coworkers and product so they want to work there.
2. Don't just post a job description and expect the best people to appear. Online postings are really classified ads. Sell your company and the position as if you were selling plants or cars.
3. Post ads where people will see them. Your competition is any organization, public or private, that wants to hire someone with similar skills to those you're seeking. Uninteresting employment ads scare applicants away.
4. If you dislike recruiting new employees, hire the right person the first time. Conduct comprehensive screenings and interviews, and have legally compliant hiring forms. Be upfront about what's expected from the employee and the company. Why did your last employee quit? Find out and, if you're at fault, fix the problem.

5. Great employees generally don't like unpleasant work environments where harassment, bullying, theft or other ethical lapses are accepted. If someone is stealing from you, your vendors or your staff, good, honest employees will quit the uncomfortable environment.

Jean believes many in our industry are "too nice" to their employees. Often trying to be understanding and supportive can yield the wrong result. When someone's going through a tough personal situation there's a tendency to relax compliance with company policies, procedures and processes. Jean says that's wrong for two reasons.

First, when an employee with personal problems shirks ingrained corporate standards, other team members can grow resentful. Second, it can lead to the affected employee feeling estranged from both the team and the job. He's frustrated about slacking off, sees fellow employees recognize it and feels the boss doesn't care. That can lead to resentment from everyone, while the boss is only trying to do the best thing for one employee.

Everyone on your team needs to be taught customer service skills, but watch the messages you send. Do you tell employees to never admit fault if they're in an accident in a company vehicle? But do you also tell team members to admit it when an order is incorrectly filled or another error has occurred? This creates conflict. What do you do? Make sure every employee knows the words, "I'm sorry." Not a glib admission of guilt, the apology must be heartfelt if it's to have a chance of building or rebuilding your customer's trust.

Those newer to the work force often must be taught empathy and humility. Jean finds, more in employers than employees, humility has become a lost trait. You should be hiring people who love people, people who can encourage new gardeners, people who can engage their fellow human beings.

Jean says, "We all can get better if we choose to. It's our choice!" **GP**