

A woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt under a dark blue apron with thin white vertical stripes. She is holding a peace lily plant with large green leaves and white flowers. In the background, another person is blurred, and there are various colorful flowers in pots, suggesting a garden center or nursery setting.

# Your Destiny Depends on Your People

You must be highly selective when hiring customer-facing staff.





## By Stan Pohmer

**B**ack in August 2020, I wrote the column in Lawn & Garden Retailer, “Krulak’s Law of Leadership,” based on a leadership/management theory presented by retired U.S. Marines Gen. Charles C. Krulak. The crux of his theory was that, though the leaders were largely responsible for creating the master plans of an engagement, the success of these plans was the result of the actions and decisions of the front-line troops who had to execute them in an environment that was ever-changing with multiple challenges (often hostile) that needed to be addressed on the spot, without the opportunity to get validation or approval from the bosses.

Krulak recognized that these front-line troops, and the way they conducted themselves, were the on-the-field representatives, the face of the organization and their strategies, much more than the leaders themselves. Accepting this theory, which the U.S. Marines did in 1999, required that the way the enlisted troops were trained, and what they were trained on, had to change; they needed to be provided with decision-making tools and the ability to act more autonomously to achieve established goals and objectives. Accepting this theory also changed the roles of leadership; their primary responsibility was now to “train to ensure that their subordinates make the right decisions.”

Correlating Krulak’s Law of Leadership to your business means that the experience customers have with your brand is, to a large degree, in the hands of the people you pay the least — your hourly employees, your seasonal workers and your cashiers — who are the face of your brand and the brand experience to your customers! Your success is largely in these folks’ hands.

### Be Choosy

In today’s tight labor market, some might say that you can’t be picky on who you hire; all you are looking for is a warm body to fill an open position. I say, au contraire, you can’t afford not to be highly selective if you accept the idea that these folks play a key role in controlling your destiny! From my experience, given a choice in hiring customer-facing staff, it’s far better to hire for attitude, aptitude, personality, and willingness to learn than to hire someone solely on their horticultural and technical knowledge. I’ve found that it’s far easier to provide enough plant knowledge to someone with superior people skills to be successful than to train people skills to someone with great horticulture knowledge.

Training new team members can be viewed in two segments, both critical to success in becoming good, valued brand ambassadors: the “soft” people and personal skills, and the “hard” technical skills. Here are some of the things I believe leaders should be training on:

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- Train to understand what your brand stands for and to get staff to buy into it.
- Train to think on their feet.
- Train to provide solutions and to assess customer needs.
- Train to know what questions to ask.
- Train to become adaptable and flexible to different people and situations.
- Train to be supportive and inspirational.
- Train them to make good decisions, but hold them accountable.
- Train them to accept authority to make decisions, as well as to accept responsibility.
- Train them on where to find answers to questions and information they don't know.
- Train them on your policies and procedures, and the limits you allow to deviate from them to resolve customer issues and complaints.
- Train them on basic plant science and plant requirements, i.e., sun, shade, moisture needs, perennials versus annuals, etc., and how you merchandise these in your displays.
- Train them about specific plant topics and questions, such as deer resistance, pollinating gardens, rain gardens, butterfly gardens, etc.
- Train them on their jobs: watering, merchandising, stocking displays inventory management and control, paper flow, etc.

It's an unrealistic expectation that seasonal staff will be or become horticultural experts. And most customers will accept an "I don't know, but let me find the answer for you" response to specific plant questions. Consider putting together laminated pocket reference cards for your team to use that detail the plants that are deer resistant, attract butterflies, etc.

Some retailers provide detailed plant information guides (including planting zones and temperature requirements) that can be carried in their pants pockets or aprons for ready reference. The information on your signage and on the products, such as pesticides and fertilizers, also offer the sales team information. When I was in lawn and garden sales, I was taught that you are an expert in the customers' eyes if you can read the signs and labels one line faster than they can!

## Training Tips

Okay, so these are some starters as to what to train new team members on; now let's consider the training how-to's. Ideally, you can bring your new hires on before the season kicks off so you have a chance to start your training when you and they are not under time pressures — and they have the opportunity to help set up the departments and become

more familiar with the products. Teaming them up with a seasoned vet can foster an open dialogue, helping to convey information and open lines of communication. Allowing the new hire to shadow a vet in customer interactions will show them the ropes and help build confidence.

Formal classroom training by company leaders to explain the company brand, mission and values and to set expectations will help provide the guidepost for new hire behaviors and focus (it might be a good idea for all employees to sit in this meeting every year, too!). These

formal meetings are the place to discuss the company's policies and procedures, paper flow, and other topics, such as inventory management.

Vendor training, when available, can be an excellent resource. Or, if you are a grower/retailer operation, your production team can provide invaluable product-specific

information, especially regarding new additions.

Most companies conduct their training in a face-to-face mode. While there are advantages to this, it's time-consuming and repetitive for the trainer, especially if you bring on new hires at various times. You might want to consider taping some of the training modules so they can be accessed online for new employees. Computer-based training, or CBT, is especially appealing to late millennials and Gen Z employees, who are comfortable learning online.

## Maintaining the Training

All of this structured training is essential for new team member success, but, to me, the best and most impactful training comes from the leader or manager's ongoing mentoring/coaching to answer questions, benchmark performance, provide motivation and develop their potential.

As Krulak stated, the leader's main job is to train his/her staff to make good decisions, establish trust and build confidence. On a one-on-one basis, the leader hones the intrapersonal skills you hired the employee for and provides the tools and training to the new hire so they can deliver the results you expect and provide exceptional success and great experiences for your customers, so they become brand advocates and loyal, long-term purchasers.

Your seasonal and part-time employees are the face of your company, the ones who have the most contact with your customers. They're your brand ambassadors, the ones who deliver the experiences — good or bad — your customer leaves with. Select the right people and train them well to represent you. Your destiny depends on them! 🌿

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