

Consider A Return On Individuals

For the benefit of your business, offer employees the necessary continuing education to keep them up to speed and focus on their performance goals and results.



By
Bill McCurry

Maximizing Your Return At OFA

Read through these hints on how to maximize your return at this year's OFA Short Course, July 14-18. To learn more about the event, visit www.ofa.org.

Lean manufacturing. Don't let the name scare or mislead you. It's a way of thinking that will put more profit in your pocket and make your life easier. Attend the orientation/beginning session Saturday morning and the afternoon session that goes into more detail. Andy Rogish of Yoder Brothers heads these sessions.

Retailer idea exchange. Sunday evening (5:15-7:15 p.m.) will be the quickest two hours you'll spend. You'll meet new people plus share wonderful ideas that put money in your cash register. Gary Hudson and myself will again co-host this session for progressive retailers.

Kids of the Boss and Parent's of the Kids: There are two sessions to help you cope, understand and grow in the family business: "Kids of the Boss" on Monday at 2:30 p.m. and "Parents of the Kids" at 4:00 p.m. Gary Hudson and myself are leading the groups. Each position has a different perspective and unique challenges. Be sure your family members attend the appropriate sessions, and you'll be on your way to greater family harmony and increased business success.

When most business people hear ROI, they think of return on investment. Today, let's talk about a new ROI: return on individuals. Focusing on individual results will yield the overall results you want from your entire organization.

Before we can begin, we all need to be on the same page and think of things in a similar way. Warning: this thinking may be considered harsh, but it's necessary for thriving in 2007's business climate.

Feed Your Winners

Your garden center is not a non-profit sheltered workshop. There will always be team members who will produce more, be more effective and contribute more. Their actions have earned them more resources, more support and more compensation. They have delivered.

McCurry's used to operate multiple locations. We would fret over the location doing \$350,000 a year and barely pay attention to our locations doing more than \$1 million. Here was our thinking: The \$1 million stores were profitable and the lower volume stores were losing money. Logic told us (or so we thought) we should devote our resources to fixing the losing stores.

After decades of this misguided focus, we were hit over the head with a brick. If we put the management time and effort into one of our better stores, the first year gain would be more than the entire year's sales at one of the losing stores. Finally (we were slow learners), we gave a manager six months to show change in poor store sales. If we didn't see a positive change in sales patterns, we changed managers. If there was still no change, we tried to get out of the lease and close the location. In the meantime, our promotions, training and display efforts went to the higher volume stores where the return on our efforts was much greater.

The same has to be done with your employees. If you have an employee who constantly needs your personal attention and is a marginal producer, he or she is part of your problem, not part of your solution. You can't grow if you give inordinate time to employees who can't be self-starters.

Offer Continuing Education

This brings up another truth. Our changing industry requires new or updated skills. We have an obligation to offer our employees the necessary continuing educa-

tion to keep them up to speed. In return, the employees have an obligation to learn new skills. It's a partnership. You'll find there are employees who aren't capable of doing some new tasks. This doesn't mean they're bad people. It just means they're unable to do what's now required. It's like the old story of why you shouldn't try to teach a pig to sing — it wastes your time and annoys the pig.

While employees certainly aren't pigs, if you have someone in a position where you know he or she will fail, resolve it. Release the employee so he or she can get on with life in dignity and find happiness elsewhere.

You may also have an employee you may think is capable but who is unwilling to get the additional education or training to master the new skills. This isn't conducive to a productive environment either. You need to resolve this one way or the other. Either the person is a team player and realizes he or she must continually grow and expand — or the person becomes a liability.

Charles Darwin is often misquoted as prophesying, "The survival of the fittest." What he actually said was, "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment." In other words, survival is the reward for those who are adaptable to change. Change is constantly with us. We must warmly embrace it, leveraging it so we can consistently remain irreplaceable to our customers.

Focusing On ROI

Now that we have all our employees staying current with what's going on and understanding that



Pre-planning for each trade show/convention ensures you get the maximum return on individuals. Danville Gardens sends multiple team members to each show. Owners Lisa and Nathan Campbell review assignments for the recent ANLA Management Clinic with employees. After the event, each person is responsible for debriefing the rest of the team. (Photo: Danville Gardens)

resources are allocated to those who have the best payback, let's kick our earnings into high gear by focusing on ROI, a return on individuals.

Does each of your employees have goals? Do they know what's expected of them each day? Do you use these metrics to help spur productivity, or do you use them to remind the employees of their shortcomings?

Here's a test for you. Let me know if it works in your organization. It's my theory that by 9:30 a.m. every morning, the successful retailer knows not only what yesterday's sales were but also how far above/below goal they are. The retailers who have a target, monitor that target, publicize that target and focus on not just hitting but exceeding that target are successful. The same is true in situations where individual salespeople have targets.

Now, you can't cheat and do this for a week or two. It has to be part of your culture, something you do every single day. I can't say that just by doing this you'll be successful, but I can say I don't know of a financially successful garden center that doesn't know their numbers every day.

By extending this concept to employees, you leverage their input and their productivity. You have everyone being super productive toward the common goals. You don't have people wasting energy doing "what they think you wanted."

Work To Achieve Goals

Goals don't have to be just numeric sales targets. There can be targets for every position and every employee. We're a nation consumed by sports. A primary component of any sport is keeping score. Americans love to keep score. We love to know the numbers, the bottom line. If you track your people's goals and publicize them, over time they will respond positively.

Sometimes individual goals can be driven by a single event. Attendees at the OFA Short Course educational sessions can't help but meet the cheerful team from Danville Gardens, Danville, Ill. Lisa and Nathan Campbell, Danville's owners, invest heavily in their staff. Their team consists of seven employees year round and 30 in peak season.

It hasn't always been a fun ride. During last year's winter season, they had to lay off more employees than normal due to economic shifts in business. While none of the employees were thrilled about a temporary loss of income, they all understood and totally supported the Campbells' decision.

Why would a staff support layoffs? Because they knew enough about the

business of business to understand the ebbs and flow of cash. The staff frequently attends ANLA's Management Clinic, the OFA Short Course and other educational events.

"It takes courage to continue to invest in people," Lisa confessed. "When the season hasn't gone as well

as you'd like, you're tempted to stop educating your staff. That's not wise. It says a lot about our employees and their attitude when they want to continue to learn. It also says a lot about the company that doesn't have opportunities for their employees to learn. If your employees can't gain

more knowledge working for you, will you be able to keep and attract the kind of employees you want?"

Plan To Attend

Of course, everybody can't come to every event. The Campbells try to attend as many educational ▶

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sessions as possible. They do whatever economizing they can to stretch their educational dollars. Nathan laughs about one early event where he, Lisa and two female employees shared a hotel room. Today, with the company in better financial condition, they're

able to house convention attendees two to a room (and no more co-ed housing!). Many times they'll drive together in one car rather than fly so they can use the road time to talk through business issues and debrief on the return.

Lisa and Nathan don't leave

things to chance at these events either. For this year's OFA Short Course, as an example, they will have pre-planning meetings when the schedule comes out. They will determine which employees will attend which sessions. Usually only one Danville employee attends

each session. That person is responsible for taking notes and sharing what he or she learned with the rest of the team.

"It's not a vacation, it's work," Lisa stressed, pointing out that if employees have never gone before, they have an image of a trip out of town with restaurant meals and a nice hotel. They don't realize that they're expected to be at 7:30 a.m. sessions and participate in evening idea exchanges. "They can choose some of the sessions they want to go to. Then Nathan or I will tell them 'these are the sessions we signed you up for,' so we know they're gaining skills we think are important as well. It has to be a mix of sessions they want to go to plus some the company needs them to have."

Lisa and Nathan cover these assignments in a planning meeting with everyone who is attending. The planning agenda includes things like what to wear, where they will be staying, hotel room assignments, transportation plans as well as their individual schedules of educational sessions. Beyond that there can be specific knowledge goals, such as, "What's a new fun customer event we can run this year?" or "How can we be more efficient at the cash register?"

The OFA Garden Center Idea Exchange is a must for all Danville attendees. Lisa and Nathan specifically want every employee to attend the Idea Exchange. And they don't sit at the same table in their own exclusive group. "It's important for our employees to understand how unique we are. When they exchange with other garden centers, it broadens their knowledge, not just of successful business tactics but also their knowledge of how special Danville Gardens is. It's also a time they can share what they know so it helps them see their personal growth in our industry," Lisa shared.

The Importance Of Debriefing

For Danville Gardens, the most important part of getting a ROI is the debriefing after the event. When everyone is back from the Short Course, they have meetings at which each employee shares what they learned, including good and bad ideas. This helps those who didn't attend stay up to speed on what new strategies, products and concepts are working in the industry.

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“We try to have regular meetings to debrief everyone on the team when we get back. Sometimes we can do it and other times we don’t do enough because we’re crazy planting in the greenhouse or have big customer events.” Lisa believes

that even though every employee can’t attend every event, they can all learn something from their associates who did attend.

The Campbells are focusing on each individual on their team so they can keep them motivated and

efficient. They’re looking for and finding a return on individuals. How are you doing? 🐼

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