



Keeping Your

Best Employees

Good employees can make or break your company; find out how to keep the good ones.

By Bernard Erven

Quality employees are not a luxury; they are essential to achieve sales, customer service and financial and growth goals.

The challenge for garden centers is to provide permanent jobs that are attractive to people whom other employers are trying to hire, as depending on temporary employees who are waiting for a better job to come along guarantees never-ending labor headaches.

The best way to keep star employees is to convince them that they have excellent jobs and that their garden center employer provides an excellent place to work. Job design, team building and employer reputation are the key ingredients. Garden center man-

agers are the builders. Their focus should be employees, and they should emit happiness. Why should employees be pleased to continue working at a garden center managed by someone not proud of what they have to offer?

DESIGN EMPLOYEE-FRIENDLY JOBS

Garden centers should capitalize on employees' interests and the advantages they see in garden retailing. People who love plants are motivated by the opportunity to work with plants. Some employees like customers more than plants; others like tools and gardening equipment. Some enjoy repairing equipment more than selling it.

Managers first need to consider the tasks that must be accomplished for the garden center to succeed. Then, they need to consider what individuals want in their jobs. Sometimes minor changes in job design can dramatically improve an employee's view of a job, e.g., having some input into improving signage, more customer contact or less time watering.

Job design cannot overcome the fact that no job is perfect. Garden center jobs have some disadvantages managers need to address when designing jobs. Each of the following job expectations often appear in employee complaints: reasonable number of work hours per day and per week, proper equipment in good repair, well lighted and

ventilated work areas, training, some flexibility in scheduling work hours and regular communication with the supervisor.

First, design jobs that encourage and motivate employees to use a variety of skills. Think about why assembly line jobs are boring. Standing in one place using only one or two skills to do the same thing over and over is not satisfying for most people.

Second, design jobs so employees stay with a job from start to finish, e.g., all aspects of new signage in the store. Even a simple door repair task may be more satisfying if one person has the responsibility of doing everything, including determining what parts are needed, buying parts, taking the door apart, replacing parts, reassembling and testing.

Third, design jobs so employees understand the significance of their jobs. Why is customer service important? What problems are caused later on if short cuts are taken with young plants? Employees should have answers to these kinds of basic questions.

Fourth, design jobs so each employee has responsibility, challenge, freedom and the opportunity to be creative. This requires delegation of some authority. Delegation can be a powerful tool for improving a job. "You can do the job however you want as long as you get results." Such words, delegation and responsibility can have positive impacts on employees.

Finally, make feedback a part of job design. Well-designed jobs anticipate the

Satisfied employees, such as this one at Portland Nursery, Portland, Ore., will speak highly about their jobs and your garden center.

need for communication. Most employees want to know what is expected of them, how they are doing, how they can improve, what latitude they have in changing how they do tasks, what should be discussed with a supervisor and when the discussion should occur. Employees rarely complain about too much communication with their supervisor. They often want more communication.



BUILD A TEAM

Saying “We are a team” is easy; actually functioning as a team is difficult. Making employees feel important often starts with how employers view employees. Are employees working managers or managed workers? Having employees who function as working managers suggests that each

person in the business has ideas on how to improve the business. Even those people incapable of understanding much about the business beyond their own jobs may have ideas about how to do their jobs better. Useful suggestions often stay hidden inside employees’ heads when they do not feel they are an important part of the business.

Emphasize team building. Teams are built through four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing. In the forming stage, employees break the ice with each other, become oriented to store goals and begin to exchange ideas. The forming stage is particularly important when integrating new employees with established employees. Storming is the stage of conflict, open disagreement and the surfacing of conflicting ideas. Hidden disagreements constrain trust and team growth. Norming follows from resolving conflicts. Team harmony and unity arise. By this stage, team members’ roles are clear. By the performing stage, the team is functioning well. The entire team solves problems for the good of the business.

Turnover among team members forces the team to retreat to a previous stage of development followed by rebuilding. Sometimes the retreat is all the way back to the forming stage. Clearly, a continuous rebuilding of the team negatively affects longer-term employees. Thus, employee satisfaction and employee turnover are closely related. Too often, the impact of turnover on other employees is ignored.

Rewarding only individual efforts sends a strong signal to employees that the business is a collection of individuals rather than a team. An employer should avoid saying, “We are a team” and then encouraging employees to look out first for their own interests. Start by asking how the perennial plant team is doing or how the garden supply team is doing. Then ask how individuals within these teams are doing.

BUILD A REPUTATION

One’s reputation is highly personal. The good news is that each employer “owns” his or her reputation in the community. Being known as a good place to work immediately gives new employees pride. They speak with

Store success goes hand in hand with employee success. Happy and successful employees, such as this one at Pesche’s Garden Center, Des Plaines, Ill., will make your garden center that much better.

enthusiasm to relatives and friends about their job and start with a positive mindset about their jobs, coworkers, supervisors and responsibilities.

The following is a list of guidelines, strategies, policies and practices that will help. Some of these overlap with job design and team building already discussed.

Like, Enjoy and Appreciate Employees. The manager's attitude toward employees can have a great impact on the relationship. Employees easily sense the extent to which their employer likes, enjoys and appreciates them. An employer with a poor attitude needs to examine its impact on their store's reputation as a good place to work.

A few bad experiences with just one or two employees can sour one's attitude. Step back and put the bad experiences in the context of all employees over the last few months and years. Work hard to prevent a single employee or a few employee incidents from poisoning an attitude toward employees in general.

Use Written Job Descriptions. Employees like to know what they have been hired to do. As responsibilities change, they like to have an explicit understanding with their supervisor. Employees also appreciate knowing what managers do and what their coworkers do. Job descriptions provide an excellent foundation for performance evaluations and discussion of training needs.

Provide Training. Few people enjoy doing what they cannot do well. Training is an investment in people. An employer's willingness to make this investment in employees helps build a positive image among employees, customers and others in the community.

Show Trust. Show trust in employees by delegating authority and responsibility to them. The delegation helps satisfy employees' esteem needs and improves their sense of being part of a team. A bonus from delegating is the time the manager gains that can be applied to more important tasks.

Catch People Doing Things Right. Performance appraisals that emphasize the positive will help build the reputation of the employer. Focusing on the negative by catching people doing things wrong and then correcting them causes employees to

fear, or at least dread, performance appraisals. Emphasizing the negative creates an air of assumed guilt rather than the desired air of competence and confidence.

Develop Pride. Building widespread pride in the garden center is

a long-term effort. Getting recognition, such as visitors' success stories and articles in the local media, can help. Employee recognition outside the organization and public shows of appreciation also help. Providing employees with attractive hats, shirts

and jackets, with their name and the company's logo, that they can wear outside of work sends a message that employees are glad to be part of your garden center.

Celebrate Successes. Teams are expected to work together to accom-

plish goals. They should also celebrate together when the goals are accomplished. Celebrations express the employer's appreciation.

Communicate Clearly and Often. Staff meetings, a daily break period including supervisors and employees, a message board, two-way radios, clear instructions, opportunities to ask questions, regular performance appraisals and joint planning are just a few examples of how managers can facilitate communication. An employee complaint of too much communication is rare. A complaint of not enough communication is common.

Compensate Fairly. The fairness of compensation — a very important matter — depends on both external equity and internal equity. Garden center employers and their employees measure external equity by comparing garden center pay with what employees could be earning elsewhere in the community, given their abilities and experience. Internal equity measures how one employee's compensation compares to that of others within the store who are doing work with similar value to the organization. Paying only on the basis of how long a person has worked at the store can cause the most valuable employees to earn less than a long-term average worker.

Provide Exceptional Monetary Benefits. Total compensation includes both cash wages and monetary benefits such as health insurance, paid vacation, paid sick leave, retirement programs, housing and utilities, uniforms, overtime pay and pay differentials, e.g., holidays and weekends. A store's reputation can be considerably enhanced by offering benefits employees consider exceptional. A cafeteria of benefits allows employees to make choices based on their needs and preferences. Offering choice need not increase the employer's cost for benefits.

Provide Extraordinary Informal Benefits. Informal rewards either have no out-of-pocket cost or are low cost in terms of the employee's total compensation. Some examples are: birthday cards sent to employees' children; supervisor attending all weddings, baptisms and birthday parties to which invited by an employee; taking a course in the language spoken by non-English-speaking employees; personally greeting each employee each day; seeking out an employee just to say thank you; offering an "employee of the year" award with the recipient chosen by other employees; and giving an especially deserving employee tickets to a sold out sporting event or concert. Only the employer's creativity limits the potential.

Promote from Within. Promoting from within recognizes an employee's contributions and shows the employer's confidence in the employee. It also sends a signal to other employees that they have career advancement opportunities without changing employers.

Become Family-friendly. Child rearing, finding reliable childcare and emergencies caused by illness are examples of family factors that cause employee frustrations. These same factors can cause tardiness and absenteeism.

Making your business family-friendly means anticipating these family-caused frustrations and pressures and helping employees deal with their family responsibilities. Some ideas to consider: providing child care at or near the store, offering emergency child care, providing a list of child care providers in the community, allowing flexible hours and job sharing and offering health insurance with family coverage. Family-friendly measures increase the cost of labor, but they also help attract and keep qualified employees.

IN SUMMARY

Remember that store success goes hand in hand with employee success. Employee turnover, unqualified employees, employees satisfied to just get by, labor shortages and self-focused employees are chronic frustrations for all managers. Making your garden center an appealing place to work helps overcome these frustrations and builds a high-quality labor force.

The three interrelated guidelines discussed in this article can help: 1) design jobs with employees in mind, 2) build a team and make employees an important part of that team and 3) build a reputation as an outstanding employer. Immense benefits await garden centers able to use these guidelines. 🌱

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