

Teaching Your Team to Think

By Jim Paluch



All around the country, on the same day of the week, at the same time of day, successful, progressive garden centers are gathering their entire teams together to train. The topic that everyone is training on this particular day is “Identifying and Greeting the Different Styles of Customers.” The session begins with one of the team members standing and reading the company mission statement, followed by the introduction of another team member chosen to lead this training session because they were one of the best at greeting customers. The session is conducted from a well-thought-out and prepared agenda and facilitator’s guide that was printed off the Internet, allowing the instructor to give a personal touch to the topic and making it interesting and fun for the entire group participates. The session concludes approximately one half hour later with another volunteer offering an inspirational quote from Cal Ripken and next week’s trainer and topic being introduced. To even tax your imagination a little further, this happens each week — 52 weeks each year!

The above scenario may be hard to imagine, but the reality is that it is already taking place in the landscape industry and has recently been introduced to the garden center industry through the Massachusetts Nursery and Landscape Association (See “Action Zone” on page 56).

Two and a half years ago, my firm, JP Horizons Inc., conducted an experiment with 14 of our best clients. They were landscape companies ranging from \$500,000 to over \$12 million in annual sales and all with a mix of services and types of employees. With their input, we created a 52-week calendar with a variety of training topics, ranging from technical to interpersonal skills, and challenged them to see who could train for 52 weeks straight.

With the help of the Internet, there was opportunity for constant communication between the companies and weekly updates on who was training and how they were doing it. The results? Thirteen of the original 14 companies trained for 52 straight weeks, with most of the original group still training — 135 straight weeks. Today, hundreds of landscape companies are training thousands of employees across the company with the systematic and effective techniques of the Training Challenge.

TEACHING YOUR TEAM TO THINK

Probe behind the scenes of any successful company, and an atmosphere of learning will be part of the corporate culture.

These successful companies have committed to doing far more than just throwing information at half-interested people and then complaining a week later that nobody cares about anything and that training does not work. These successful companies are teaching people to think!

Critical thinking goes beyond just learning a skill. It helps individuals process information received from all available sources and apply that knowledge to gain a desired outcome.

Are you wondering how all of this keeps your crew from over-watering or a new salesperson from driving away a customer? Does the concept of educating employees on how to use information make sense to you? Would you like to know how to integrate the elements of critical thinking into your educational programs? The first step is to do what I have done in this paragraph...ask questions!

When information can be blended with well-thought-out questions that draw all the participants into the thought process, then critical thinking is taking place. The instant a question is asked, our onboard computer goes to work and starts the critical thinking process. When questions become a planned and implemented part of training, then people are being taught to think!

CAN YOU CHANGE?

Over the years, we have discovered several mistakes that well-meaning companies make. Mistakes like staring at videos, reading or memorizing facts, training with no clear purpose and just not having fun always lead to short-term success and long-term frustration with training.

If any of the items in the above list describe your training efforts, you now have to ask yourself whether or not you can change. The Training Challenge has been a success because the participating companies have been able to systematically change their approach to training. This is evident in the training reports coming in each week. We often see statements like, “This was a fun session that everyone gave great input on,” “We had a hands-on experience that allowed people to see exactly what happens if...” These companies have discovered what educational researchers have been telling us for

CHALLENGE CALENDAR

6 Number of participating garden centers

8 7 Average Number of employees trained per week

3 Number of training jams scheduled this year

June 13
FNCA Training Jam,
Wesley Chapel, Fla.

June 18
Founders complete
15th consecutive week

July 14
Proven Winners’ Training Jam,
Columbus, Ohio

Nov. 5
CNLA Training Jam,
Windsor, Conn.

April training topics:

“Garden Center Sales Strategies,”
“The Value of a Customer,”
“Teamwork and Team Building”

a number of years: "For learning to take place, training must be fun, interactive, results-oriented, timely and have a purpose or goal in mind." Consider using this statement as you evaluate your present approach to training. If

you should be fortunate enough to attend a regional Training Jam, contrast the Training Challenge approach to your present approach and ask how a process like ours can make a difference in your company. 

Jim Paluch is a popular author, speaker and coach for businesses across the country. His firm, JP Horizons Inc. has developed the processes that support the Training Challenge and has made training a positive experience for every company

participating. His degree in landscape architecture and passion for the green industry has had a tremendous impact on hundreds of landscape firms, nurseries and garden centers. To find out more about the Training Challenge, E-mail beth@jphorizons.com, call (877) JPH

OVERCOMING TRAINING OBSTACLES

OK, you've overcome your own resistance, and you're committed to setting up a consistent training program. The first session is about to begin, and you can tell by the chilly silence, crossed arms and downcast eyes that getting everyone fired up is going to be more than a challenge...it'll be an act of heroism!

Why do we feel it takes such a valiant effort to implement a great training program? It's simply because our experience with conventional training makes us feel this way.

So, here's how the six MNLA Founder's Group garden centers used their first session to turn these negative perceptions about training into energy and action in less than 30 minutes. First, the trainers did something a little out of the ordinary - they didn't give a speech. They invited everyone to think about training with questions like:

What don't you appreciate about training?

How many reasons can you come up with NOT to train?

When you think of training, what thoughts come to mind?

In response, the crew at Laughton's Garden Center, Chelmsford, Mass., came up with the following list of obstacles and wrote them down on a flip chart:

- just want to criticize us;
- no one will show up;
- we're too busy; and
- it'll be boring

Then they discussed ways to overcome each obstacle. According to Laughton's Training Coordinator, Mark Bisher, "all of us really came

up with positive feedback to counter the negatives, for example, open-mindedness, teamwork, attitude and letting go of negative feelings."

This "team approach" to training engages people fast because they see right away that they are valuable contributors to the outcome of the session and, in the long term, to the success of the business. Bisher adds, "I saw a marked difference in just 10 minutes from sleepy people to a smiling, contributing group."

Now, let's imagine a different scenario where the trainer talks and talks about the importance of training - "blah, blah, blah...see you next week at 8:00 sharp!" What would be going on in the participants' minds? "Aghh! Let me out of here!" That's precisely the expectation we've created over years and years of "unloading information" on people in educational sessions.

Training is so much more than dumping knowledge on others. I'll have much more to say about training in future articles, but for now, I offer that the best possible role for the trainer is "thought catalyst." The well-prepared trainer arrives early for the session loaded not with notes, but with great, thought-provoking questions and a mental roadmap for reaching the objectives of the meeting. They generate discussion with open-ended questions, listen and guide the meeting toward the learning objective.

After their lively first session on leaping over those training obstacles, Hammon Buck, owner of Plants Unlimited, Rockport, Maine, reported that an employee said, "this training promotes an opportunity for an individual to make a difference and add to the company by making them more knowledgeable and confident."

Most obstacles to training are perceptions that you can minimize by