

Your Best Employees Want More than \$\$



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Most landscape workers are under-trained, under-appreciated and underpaid. If you're an owner or manager, you know this. If you're an hourly employee this hasn't escaped your notice, either. Apart from burger flippers and Wal-Mart greeters, few fulltime U.S. workers make less money. The difference is that landscaping is hotter, harder work than most other lower-wage occupations.

The economics and competitive environment of landscaping being what they are these days (maintenance contracts in many markets at or below what they were a decade ago and the construction business is still wobbly) it's pretty tough to bump up employees' wages. Or, at least, much above what the competition offers. The numbers don't allow it.

Beyond that, perhaps you've noticed that there aren't that many responsible young men out there looking for jobs mowing lawns or installing pavers. Historically young men are what our industry has relied upon to do most of the work. In some companies, of course, that pool of potential workers has been augmented and, in some cases, replaced by foreign-born seasonal workers.

Back in our economy's go-go years, which ended abruptly in 2007, the United States was almost at full employment. Some of us surmised (or perhaps kidded ourselves) that was why we couldn't attract local young people to our landscape companies. But, even now with national unemployment rate exceeding 8 percent, and probably much higher depending on a more accurate accounting, the contractors that I talk to say that few young U.S. citizens are willing to consistently put in a long days mowing lawns, trimming ornamentals or laying pavers.

So, what to do?

Realizing that for every batch or new-hires fitted with a company tee-shirt, hat, armed with a leaf blower and turned loose on clients' properties, perhaps only one might make the grade, the best strategy might be to concentrate on keeping and growing that one responsible employee.

After all, isn't that one good, honest, hard-working employee better than a whole crew of screw-ups?

First, realize that money, as important as it is (no kidding!), is not the whole reason people quit jobs. Workers are people, not machines. They need positive human direction and interaction beyond being handed a list of company rules along with some basic job training. In a very small company the employee often interacts directly with the owner, in larger companies with a manager or field supervisor. How this relationship evolves will almost certainly determine how effective and loyal that employee becomes. People typically don't quit companies; they quit bosses.

So, what do employees want these days, especially the few that are willing to start at the bottom and work their way up? Workers surveyed over the past several decades have said essentially the same thing.

1. Employees want work that satisfies them, that earns them appreciation from employers and customers.
2. They want to get financially rewarded for their efforts. If they go the extra mile they expect to be recognized for it and paid for it.
3. They understand what it means to be held accountable and responsible, and, in many cases, welcome it.
4. They want to be able to see a career path that allows them more responsibility, prestige and rewards (financial and otherwise) within an organization.
5. They want job assignments that allow them to continue to learn and grow.
6. They want a balance between their employment and their personal lives, and many will gladly trade time off for pay.

Yes, pay is important, and nobody's going to do anything unless they're paid a fair wage. But pay is usually not why most people stay at a company or leave, especially a landscape company where the days are long, often hot and the work is tiring. It's all the other stuff, and especially how the new-hire perceives the management's interest in him as a part of the team and what that role will be, that determines if the good young employee stays or not.