

# Growing People Inspiring The Future

**Make the time for meaningful training and watch your employees blossom.**

by **JIM PALUCH**

It has been said the best way to predict the future is to create it. Good, ongoing training programs do just that. By consistently training, over time you will create your company's future. It is as simple and profound as that. A small percentage of your company's time ensures you will not only be competitive in the future, but will also create a culture of excitement where employees feel valued and want to make positive contributions.

Let's take a quick look at sales and how they depend upon other departments. What good is having a well-trained sales staff that can cast a long line and reel in big fish if the production people can't complete the order? Too often, we see a barrier between the production staff and sales teams. What happens is instead of making the company profitable, these two groups spend time and energy competing to prove they work the hardest and have the most difficult jobs. Through cross training, these groups can learn how to appreciate each other and work together for greater profitability.

When your customers give you an order for a large quantity of bedding plants, trees or shrubs, do you think they care how hard everyone's job is within your organization? No way. I often tell my clients that to rev up sales, our staff needs to work with the production department. This comment usually raises a few eyebrows, but for sales to grow, everyone must realize the overall goals.

Everyone is responsible for making the company profitable. If production doesn't support the sales staff, sales can't grow. That's why cross training is imperative. Greenhouse workers who tend plants have to understand the company's vision. Sales people have to understand the limitations of production. And language barriers, although challenging, are no excuse for lack of communication.

## Time For Training

Right away, we usually hear people say they'd love to train all their employees but they have neither the time nor resources to begin, and that to be productive, they need to focus on simply doing their jobs – not learning about someone else's.

Realize that by spending a little time finding out how other departments work, hours and hours of miscommunication can be avoided. Participants in JP Horizons' Training Challenge program often say they found it difficult to begin training, but once they did, they can't imagine not doing it.

Ask Tracey Lester, vice president and manager of the maintenance division at Architerra, Indian Creek, Ill. Architerra specializes in all aspects of landscape maintenance, design installation and snow removal. Founded in 1982, Architerra's 27 employees serve a mix of commercial and residential landscape clients.

Her company has been training the entire staff for four years for a half-

hour every Wednesday morning. She says it is one of the week's best-spent half-hours. Here, employees are not only exposed to various aspects of running a landscape business, but they're also in situations where they learn about each other. Architerra wants to create a culture that encourages growth and camaraderie. While educating employees was the original premise for conducting the Training Challenge, over the years its purpose evolved into something grand – a fun time-out where people learned about each other. Lester concedes that not everyone will remember every last bit of the material, but she knows they will remember how much fun they had when competing in the Bobcat Rodeo or learning how to change oil.

That kind of harmony has a huge payoff. Architerra's commitment to training has produced well-informed employees who go out and make good impressions on their customers. "Our clients tell me they notice how much more professional our people are than other companies' workers," Lester says. "They'll ask our workers questions and be

surprised to find out our crews actually have an understanding of proper planting and pruning techniques for various plants. Our equipment is in better condition now that everyone knows how to take care of it, which contributes to on-time job completions."

## Find Your Focus

If you're not sure where to get started, just ask your employees what they would like to know about your company and how they generate profits. Chances are good you'll fill up a legal pad or white board with ideas. Employees are usually very curious about what goes on in other areas. If you get various groups together, you'll also create an opportunity for people to get to know each other and build off of each others' strengths.

Once you've made a list of things to focus on, enlist different members of the team to train on topics specific to their expertise. No one likes to be



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taught by the same person in the same way week after week. Ask questions and invite everyone to share their knowledge and ideas.

Next, schedule short training sessions that require action. No more four-hour lecture marathons. People learn while doing, not passively hearing someone else spout off. Keep the information coming in small, easily digestible amounts where participants engage in role playing and demonstrations.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that one session will cure all that ails you. People need to be continually reminded of the company's goals and how various departments can support it. Schedule weekly meetings and then provide opportunities for employees to put each week's ideas into practice.

If some of your employees speak another language, get a translator or find someone who can make sure all the groups will receive the message. In fact, have other cultures share some of their customs.

In brief, here is a checklist to energize your initial training session:

- Keep sessions short and fun.

Don't be afraid to do something completely out of the ordinary.

- Quickly preview what you are going to learn in each training session. In general, people like to be told what they are going to hear, hear it and then be reminded of what they learned.

- Engage everyone in a short conversation to introduce the topic, beginning with a brief introduction. Then continue to promote participation throughout the session.

- Spend 10 minutes presenting the heart of the matter.

- Now they are ready for the best part – some sort of activity that will ingrain the new info. How about hands-on demonstrations or a critical thinking exercise for a few minutes?

- Before ending, let them repeat what they have learned, then pat them on the back with an inspiring thought or a sincere compliment.

- Remind them of next week's session and get them out the door for a productive day.

As companies recognize the importance of consistent training

and then make a commitment to it, profits grow, employees grow and the future begins to unfold in ways they never imagined. **GG**

**About the author:** Jim Paluch is president of JP Horizons, a group of training professionals that has been helping green industry companies develop a culture of learning for over 15 years. For more information on the Training Challenge, go to [www.jphorizons.com](http://www.jphorizons.com).



**Fun activities can also be team building, like this one at Architerra.**