By Peter Szymczak

Assuming you grow or sell good plants — a safe assumption in Oregon, where the green industry is a very quality-focused, competitive market — plus the fact that horticulture is technically far ahead of where it used to be 30 or 40 years ago, the next logical step is to focus on your business. And that leads to people.

There’s a problem, however. Horticulture as an industry is not attracting people to its workforce the way it once did, and the current workforce is aging. Many companies are already operating with lean staff, due to attrition and not replacing staff, and also downsizing during the last few years as a result of a difficult economy.

In fact, the 29th International Horticultural Conference (IHC2014) will focus on education, research training and consultancy to address the declining student and staff numbers in horticulture. “In this environment, focusing on retaining workers and cross-training them to be more efficient makes sense,” according to conference organizers.

Facing a shortage of workers, nursery and greenhouse owners should seek ways to retain good employees. A good, motivated employee makes an impact far greater than his or her cost. Conversely, a bad employee will cost you far more than you will ever know.

Finding and keeping employees

As an employer, your primary concerns are your needs, from staying within budget to achieving sales goals. If your baseline opinion is that every employee is just lucky to have a job, chances are you, too, will just be lucky to get the bare minimum of work done. Therefore, it’s a good exercise to put yourself in the shoes of your employee.

What are you offering in terms of opportunity? Vision? The future?

Oregon’s horticulture industry has a sense of place and purpose that grows with each successive season. Brands, business models, quality of product—all are created by employees and company culture, which comes from above and enables employees to do their best work possible.

Creating a company culture

Your perspective as an employer is the driving force behind attracting, retaining and training a winning team. Defining “who we are” establishes a company culture that employees can identify with and rally around beyond “what we are” (aka your product, what you sell or grow).

“If we didn’t have problems, we wouldn’t need managers” is a saying Allan Elliott, operations manager at Carlton Plants in Dayton, Ore.,
heard early in his career and he has never forgotten. One way Elliott hopes to minimize those problems is by empowering the employees at Carlton Plants with training and other avenues for professional growth.

“It’s an investment in the workforce, leading to greater employee satisfaction, better performance on the job, and better pay — all of which serves to underline the company’s core objective of growing a quality product,” he said, stating the company’s culture in a nutshell.

Company culture is the substance behind the profit. It provides a framework for employment decisions, whether hiring, promoting or firing. It is inspirational in good times, but particularly in tough times. It sets the pace for excellence, giving great employees a reason to stay and weeding out lesser employees. It is as valuable as compensation: there should be an inherent value to working for you.

Carlton Plants is a large operation, employing about 200 full-time staff members and 100 contract laborers. But size shouldn’t be a deterrent to creating a company culture.

Consider these facts: According to a 2010 survey by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than half (approximately 1,000) of the 1,800 nursery and greenhouse operations in Oregon had annual sales of less than $20,000. That survey also found that Oregon’s nursery industry employed 20,600 in 2009, including 9,500 full-time workers and 11,100 seasonal workers. That’s an overall industry average of just 12 employees per operation, with most reporting much smaller work crews.

Putting policies into place
Since problems are unavoidable, it’s important to have policies in place to deal with them when they arise.

Many employee issues result from a lack of communication, management engagement, and consistent application of company policy.

At the most basic level, an employee-focused company culture provides:
• Policy, such as an employee manual
• Consistency and structure: A mission statement that answers the question, “Who are we?”
• Leadership
• Support from management/ownership, and
• Regular review and support.

Employees generally know what they are supposed to be doing, but they don’t always know that you know. Reviews are an opportunity to give and get feedback: Are we on track? Have we fallen off the rails? What do we need to do to get back to where we should be?

At Carlton Plants, safety coordinator Sonia Fernandez meets regularly with employees, individually and in groups, to make certain they are up-to-date with safety protocol and job responsibilities.

“What are your responsibilities as a sprayer, as a tractor driver?” Fernandez asked, for example. “Making sure everyone is aware of the basic stuff — not just to do the job, but to do it in a way where they don’t hurt themselves.”

Fernandez has worked at Carlton Plants for 35 years: she started as a general laborer, moved up to crew leader, then into human resources, where she has worked for more than 20 years now.

“Quality has always been the prime motivator, and it’s why we’re still in business,” Fernandez said. “We probably voice it more than we ever have, and our employees feel a sense of pride in what they do. Some people just want to be a cyclical employee, but we try to stress with them the ways we want things to be done, and to take pride in their work. This is what we expect.”

Attracting good employees
Established companies with a strong brand, such as Carlton Plants, have an easier time of attracting talent. The challenge for new business owners or small companies is to establish who they are and what kind of employees will make the most impact.

The costs of hiring the wrong employee can add up to a long list of losses: lost wages, lost training expenses, lost sales, lost customers, lost potential — not to mention the external damage to your company’s reputation and internal damage to staff morale.

To prevent these consequences, it’s important to attract the right talent.

Online listings such as Craigslist are one of the most common ways of finding workers for rural jobs. The problem with looking online, however, is respondents are anonymous and more often than not result in an
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serves multiple purposes. “Number one, it’s a way to provide a job interview over 11 weeks for prospective employees. We hire interns directly off the intern program,” Wenner said. “It’s also a great public relations tool for dealing with colleges and universities that we cooperate with. It also sends out ambassadors of goodwill from the nursery who go out and work in other areas of horticulture.”

Training enables growth

Once you have the right people on the team, there are many ways to help them grow.

Through ongoing education, encouraging participation with professional organizations such as the International Plant Propagators Society, and other learning opportunities, employers can create a work environment that motivates employees to be productive and safe.

Carlton Plants sends supervisors to seminars conducted by SAIF Corporation, the Bureau of Labor and Industries, OAN’s Farwest Trade Show, the Oregon Governor’s Health and Safety Conference, to name just a few. “All of these are great ways to open up people’s eyes and ears to information and concepts they may have not seen or heard before,” said Elliott.

Continuing education is also supported. “If people want to take classes at Chemeketa Community College, then they have to get a passing grade, and we will pay for their tuition. It has to be a subject relevant to the job: math, English language or horticulture.”

Whether big or small, companies can maximize each employee by honing in on an individual’s strengths.

“People think anybody can be a general laborer. I don’t agree with that,” Fernandez said. “It’s more about who wants to do certain types of work. Some people prefer to drive a tractor. Some people love to do grafting — not just anybody can do that! It’s about finding the right niche for each individual, work that makes them happy. If they like to do it, then they take pride in it.”

Retaining good employees

Employees who continue to learn on the job and who receive cross-training are more likely to stay with the company.

There are other, more commonsense ways to retain your best employees. For instance, to determine fair compensation and benefits, talk with peer groups such as the Oregon Association of Nurseries and its chapters. Keep in mind your employees are helping you grow your business, so be as reasonable as you possibly can.

Be consistent with all things related to employment. Don’t change health care benefits on a whim, for example. When change is needed, make sure the impact is as minimal as possible, recognizing how personal such changes can be.

Successfully managing these areas lets employees know they have a future. People want to be in places where they can do good work, be recognized, and be part of a team, so be clear about where they are going and what their contribution is.

Most growers don’t spend money unless they absolutely need to, because who knows what’s going to happen in the next growing cycle? It’s easy to get caught up in the weeds of growing, selling and everything else. But those things shouldn’t come at the expense of determining who you are, what kind of employees will best accomplish your goals today, and how you want your company to grow in the future.

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