

A Personal View on Staff Relations and Training

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INTRODUCTION

Often I think I'm incredibly lucky to be involved in a job that covers such a wide variety of skills and interest. On any given day I might be taking cuttings, organising staff, doing the books, weeding, or marketing. A great combination of earthy, people, and administrative skills. I'm sure life is similar for a lot of you.

The questions arise. How do we best manage time and staff? How do we create a good working atmosphere? Why are we in business? For the last question I suspect for most it's a love of plants and a decent way of making a living.

At the moment I have an apprentice working for me and this year I am the Nursery Representative for the Education Advisory Committee at Richmond Polytechnic, Nelson. This has given me the opportunity to look at training and the changes taking place.

To produce a quality product which is essential in today's environment, it's imperative to have a working environment where the employees are learning skills and are motivated, happy, and challenged. So I'd like to share some of my observations on staff relations and training.

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEMSELVES AND STAFF

Firstly, in a small business it's the boss who sets the tone for the working environment. He or she is ultimately responsible for what goes on. For me having interests outside my nursery has been critical for my sanity. I train regularly at Seido Karate and try to meditate at least 20 min per day. Having these disciplines enables me to look at my job in a reasonably clear and focused way. Crisis situations are easier to handle. I try to create a friendly and supportive working atmosphere.

Secondly, I have a responsibility for staff training whether it be encouraging my apprentice in her studies or making time for staff to go on relevant day courses, such as "growsafe chemical use" or the recent fertiliser workshops.

Thirdly, it is very important to set quality standards and it is my responsibility to implement and monitor them. For example, as a fruit tree producer we are in the process of implementing a standard quality assurance scheme for all fruit tree nurseries. A set of criteria which, if kept to, will result in certification. Customers will know they are buying a quality product.

A LOOK AT STAFF MOTIVATION

To ensure the highest level of employee performance, employers must motivate them. In my experience if you deal with people fairly, professionally, and honestly you'll be treated in the same way. So what motivates people? I've come up with 10 different factors.

1) **Make Work as Interesting as Possible.** A lot of nursery work can be boring

and repetitive. If this is the case take note and rotate jobs as required. Recognise people's differences. I have someone working for me who is happy desuckering apple rootstocks all day and does a very good job of it. Many people would get bored and quality decreases.

2) **Appreciate Your Staff.** Give praise for a job well done. A smile goes a long way. It helps people's self esteem and so they do a better job.

3) **Try to Make Staff Feel a Part of the Whole Operation.** This might mean giving special projects to people which they are entirely responsible for completing. I grow cyclamen so I could give one person the job of growing them from seed right through to sale. Share the decision making process sometimes and be open and informative on the way business is operating.

4) **Job Security.** Be clear about terms of employment. If there's only temporary work state within reason how long employment will run. For full time employees let them know that their job is secure. People like to know where they stand.

5) **Good and Fair Salary.** This is a difficult one. Many of us, me included are guilty of paying the minimum wage when perhaps an extra \$1 per hour will make a lot of difference to the employee's pocket and attitude and so make more effort and do a better job. Provide fringe benefits where appropriate—free plants or a trip to the pub.

6) **Promotion and Growth Potential.** This does not really apply to my operation being quite small but in larger businesses it's important to reward effort with promotion and wage increases where deserved.

7) **Favourable Working Conditions.** Provide well-maintained tools. A conducive environment for bagging or taking cuttings. This is hard to do in a nursery situation as we all get wet and cold at times which is OK but be aware of it.

8) **Employer Loyalty to Staff.** A good staff member deserves the loyalty of his/her boss. If you have to lay someone off make a bit of effort to find them alternative employment.

9) **Assist with Personal Problems.** Allow time off if the situation requires it. Be flexible with working hours especially for women with young children. Offer advice if required and make yourself available to listen to problems from time to time.

10) **Tactful Discipline.** It's important to be firm and clear and make sure standards are being kept. Tell someone if their behaviour is unacceptable.

Many people leave or are unhappy in their job because of lack of involvement. It is important that employees are given the opportunity to grow as human beings. This in turn will benefit the efficiency of the business. Remember that a large part of life is spent at work. It must be fulfilling. Training, evaluation, praise and satisfaction make employees work for the business.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE NEW TRAINING SYSTEM

Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) are being established and they consult with education institutes regarding training. The ITOs are writing units of

learning for the new system. The new system brings together all the existing areas of training into one comprehensive system. There are eight levels with level 1 as basic, and could be studied at school, and level 8 as degree and beyond. Each of the 8 levels is broken down into units similar to university papers. A unit specifies the skills and knowledge required to reach a standard.

I have a draft copy of a landscape unit as an example. I'd like to show briefly the components of a level 3 unit.

Title "Select and plant trees and shrubs in landscape work."

Purpose. People credited with this unit will be able to select and plant trees and shrubs to a given planting plan and apply mulches and related materials to the requirements of a site specification. Then it has Elements 1-4.

- 1) Select specimens of specified trees and shrubs.
- 2) Handle trees and shrubs without damage.
- 3) Prepare and plant trees and shrubs.
- 4) Describe and apply mulches and associated covers.

Each element has subsections detailing performance criteria, e.g., 2.1 Lifting and carrying techniques used to move trees and shrubs. Minimise the risk of personal injury and damage to specimens. These units can be taken individually or in a package. Industry determines which units make a Qualification . UNITS can be cross credited, e.g., this one could be part of a forestry package. This new system is potentially very liberating as it does away with the notion of pass and fail. You might obtain some units at school, continue at Polytech, and move and get a job and study some units at the same time. Then you might go to a university. There is no repetition. The prospective employer can see the exact skill level of a potential employee. I gather that ITOs are working towards a National Certificate which will indicate levels of learning.

CONCLUSION

I hope in this brief presentation it might stimulate you to look at your working environment and the potential for training. A while ago someone pointed out to me that I was very successful. I thought, what? I don't have a flashy house or car, never have much spare money, how come? Then I thought, yes. I have a business that is operating, a healthy family, good working situation, friends, and outside interests. Yes! So appreciate your successes and keep pushing your potential.