



The Care & Feeding of Company Personnel

by Steve Jeffries

"You can buy a man's time; you can buy his physical presence at a given place; you can even buy a measured number of skilled muscular motions per hour. But you cannot buy enthusiasm...you cannot buy initiative...you cannot buy loyalty...you cannot buy the devotion of hearts, minds or souls. You must earn these." - Clarence Francis

Those of us who run small businesses are faced with many challenges, including competition, client satisfaction, scheduling, and other problems. But the biggest challenge facing all of us is managing and motivating our employees. When referring to their employees, it is common to hear managers and business owners say that "no one cares; there's no one who wants to work anymore." From my experience, I have found that there is no more important issue than personnel relations.

Image and Organization Are Key

In order to be successful at attracting good employees, you must be well-organized and project the proper image. A construction company that presents itself as a professional, well-organized, and successful organization will attract and keep quality employees. An overall neat and clean appearance - starting with the company truck and going all the way up to the president's office - reflects the intentions of the company as a whole.

Good organization begins with a written list of objectives. It should be written at the beginning of each day (or week) as the job dictates. This allows the foreman and workers to know what's expected of them, and it gives the manager a means of monitoring results. This list may include as much detail as you may feel is necessary. Field employees often complain that they feel they are working for a company with no direction, and they perceive this as a threat to job security.

It is important to have a daily schedule, but it is even more important to show the foreman and the workers where the company is headed in the next six months to a year. This long-term, "whole picture" gives a sense of purpose to every employee. It's difficult for them to think about an entire job if they are only shown the plans one day at a time. It is the manager's responsibility to promote this kind of involvement.

A commanding knowledge of the entire job is extremely important for the manager who directs the crew. Managers who have no idea of how to frame a house cannot expect to set goals or solve problems for the framing crew. It leads to frustration and to a lack of confidence on the part of the worker who is looking for direction. If you are a manager who needs to learn, it may mean sharpening up your old skills. If you are a non-technical manager, you may have to learn through involvement. You can learn about many new products and techniques from local trade shows, seminars, and

trade publications. A good idea would be to take an employee to a seminar or show with you. This would educate both of you, and it also may develop a better working relationship between the two of you.

Respect: A Two-Way Street

The single most important ingredient in proper personnel management is respect. Yet it seems to be the least available aspect of a successful personnel relationship. How often have you heard this story: A young person leaves an employer and enters the marketplace with a single pick-up truck and a set of tools. In a few years he may become successful enough to hire an employee or two. Often, this entrepreneur broke away from a boss who was unaware of the needs of his employees. But when this young entrepreneur starts to hire a workforce, he gets a case of "personnel amnesia." The small successes of his new venture inflate his ego, and he forgets what it was like to be an employee. He begins to believe that he is a cut above the "average worker." This amnesia is probably the worst thing a business owner can have. Eventually, it may force the employee to leave in much the same way that his boss once left after being mistreated.

It is imperative that basic respect between manager and worker be established early and maintained daily. In a properly managed team, where mutual respect is operating, great creativity and motivation can come from even the most difficult employee.

Criticism and Praise

The way a manager either praises or criticizes an employee can also set the stage for good levels of production. When you walk onto a job, try to find the good things that are done well. If there is a gross error or a problem, consult the employee in private and explain what is wrong. Hollering and carrying on will get you nowhere, though you may end up the brunt of the next break's jokes. If early on you establish what you want your final project to be, your employees will have a clearer idea of what to aim for, and you will encounter fewer problems and less stress.

Developing Team Spirit, On Site and Off

Sometimes the manager has to get in there and do some work with the crew to help develop a team spirit. This may mean putting on a set of tools some Friday or Saturday and "working with the guys." Many times it will air out your head as well as give you keener insight into what it takes to do the job at hand. It will also establish a sense of camaraderie between you and your crew. For the less ambitious (or those who may not be able to carry two or three sheets of plywood in a day's time) you may want to organize a company fishing trip or ballgame. You don't necessarily have to pay for it. As a matter of fact,

your money won't impress them half as much as your real interest in what they may enjoy. If your intentions are not earnest, don't waste your time or money. But sometimes when you meet with your entire crew when they are not working, you see some of the problems they have when they are working.

Decent Compensation

Finally, there is compensation. Although it is the least important factor when an employee decides to leave a company, it is indeed important to consider as an employer. Try to pay your personnel as much as you can afford to and still make a reasonable profit. If you have a non-productive employee, relieve him as soon as possible. The goods one should be compensated well.

Having one employee supervise a job from beginning to end not only establishes a sense of personal pride for him, but it allows the manager to pay an incentive to the supervisor based on production. Perhaps there could be a bonus offered if the job comes in on time or under budget. After all, isn't that how you the business owner gets paid? I'm sure that under these conditions, you will find that materials will be used properly and wasted time kept to a minimum.

Even for a small company, benefits should be the standard, not the exception, in the construction industry. You may be able to take advantage of lower group rates through a trade association or a large employee pool. This is an absolute necessity because of today's high health care costs. Explain what these benefits are and what they cost. This can be done at a meeting between your insurance agent and your employees, so that questions can be properly answered.

It's an Art

Personnel management is not a precisely calculated science. It is an ongoing practice of understanding, respect, and communication. The goal is long term employee commitment - the key to any successful long-term business. And the best way to keep good people is to maintain a good memory. Remember what it was like on the other side of the fence and decide how you would like to be treated. ■

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