

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

6/1/2023

The Labor Dilemma

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For the last two months, I've had the opportunity to work at our wholesale outlet and work with our customers. Several of them have been complaining that "we just can't find or keep good help." Over the years, I've heard this unfortunate hymn so many times, I began to believe it myself. I used to reply with less-than-helpful comments, such as, "You can't find good employees since COVID. From what I hear from other companies, you should be happy you have any employees at all."

Why does our industry face this dilemma? I believe it's because prospective employees observe greenhouses and garden centers as offering the same compensation and career potential as the local McDonald's. They see an entry-level temporary or transitional job when what we'd like them to see is a fun, challenging

and rewarding opportunity. We all know the one thing holding us back from making greenhouses and garden centers the best place to work: compensation.

I know what you're saying: "We can't afford to pay our people a lot of money." But stand back and look at your employees in a different way. Do you have workers that know most of your loyal customers by name? Have an upbeat attitude? Generate repeat business just by addressing people in a positive way as they help them out? The position of worker is vital, yet many greenhouses and retailers install unmotivated, unsmiling automatons at the workplace that send customers home with a cold and damp final impression. Believe it or not, there are people out there who like to treat people with a warm smile and a hearty "Thanks for coming in to see us!" It's what they like to do and it comes naturally to them. They can make you a lot of money, so consider a way to pay them more and keep them working for you instead of someone else.

Generally, we all have been raised knowing careers matter. We look at our life journey as climbing ladders. The problem with career ladders is that you can't go down without feeling like you "failed." We feel the pressure to climb because, in our culture, that's the accepted path to gain greater prestige and more money.

Here's the irony: What if you're highly skillful at your job, yet you can't receive any financial rewards without grabbing that next rung on the ladder of success or leaving the company? What if that next rung brings you to a level where your talents aren't a good fit, and you end up unproductive and unhappy? That promotion turned out to be a curse. You and your company are worse off, except that you're getting paid more. It happens all the time.

What if employees felt rewarded and encouraged to excel in their current position and actually could earn as much as their immediate supervisor? The concept soothes that nagging promotion itch, and generates long-term thinking and a commitment to excellence.

Special compensation for outstanding employees does require extra management effort; expectations and goals need to be communicated and individual performances must be tracked and measured. Employees should receive detailed feedback often. It's a lot of work. Persistence, creativity, flexibility and attentiveness are the promises of successful performance managers. Keeping valuable long-term employees is always the goal.

Regarding seasonal employees, our management team gets together and reviews each person's performance. We discuss and compare how well they performed during both the slow and busy times, and we try to pay attention to the ones that are self-motivated and will go the extra step for the company. By doing so we can promote and reward them, too.

I believe our industry has its fair share of employment challenges, but there are ways we can combat some of those issues. First, we need to try to retain our employees by creating compensation strategies that give the employees incentive to stay, to learn and to master their skills.

Second, turn the spotlight on your superstar performers. Recognize them and make sure your management team knows that they're the best of the best. When your business is staffed with nothing but motivated performers, your payroll will generate greater returns through higher sales margins and loyal customers who will gladly pay more for the delightful experience of shopping at your store. **GT**

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