

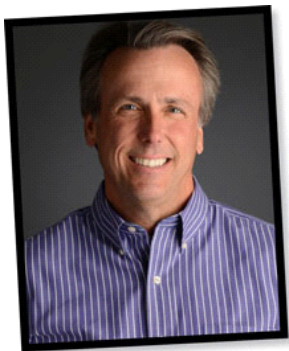
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

8/1/2023

Employees: Blessing or Curse?

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If there's one thing I know about most of you, it's that, if given the choice between dealing with staff and visiting the endodontist for a root canal, you'll take the root canal every time.

I recall a visit some time back with a grower in Virginia, about four acres, and highly automated for his size. This grower was quite self-sufficient, able to move large quantities of product around his facility by himself. When I inquired why, he replied simply, "I hate people."

I took it that he meant employees.

My friend is not alone. Most business owners, especially those with small businesses, struggle with the HR side of the job. Few are trained in the employer/employee relationship. At best, you might have interpersonal experience as a spouse or parent, but those relationships have little in common with those at work. In fact, treat your staff like children at your own risk! Also, small-business owners wear many hats, just one of which is HR. They'd much rather grow plants or replace poly or crunch numbers. Only a rare few enjoy the HR side of things.

Which is why I was surprised when Bisser Georgiev, founder and CEO of LiveTrends Design Group, told me that his entire business model is based not on the product, but on the people that make the product.

LiveTrends celebrated 10 years in business in July, hence the reason for our discussion (which you can view [HERE](#)). LiveTrends' brief history is exceptional: From five employees in 2013 to 500 today; a growth rate of 50% each year (and more than 1,000% in the first few years); and a spot on the Inc. 500 list in 2017. Today, LiveTrends ships an astounding 300,000 pieces of their unique plants and containers every week! And that's not counting LiveTrends Europe.

However, it was a shoestring startup. Unable to attract investors or a bank, Bisser and his wife, Lenka, funded the launch of LiveTrends themselves, even cashing in their retirement savings.

"We didn't have the capital, but culture was one thing that I've been studying for a long time, when it comes to leadership and understanding what fuels organizations," Bisser said. "So, for me, I had to focus on people. I had to focus on the best possible environment for my employees to work, to have fun, to be creative, to be independent ... it was a very deliberate style of leadership."

Think about that: Launching a new business not focused on the product, but on the people who would be

responsible for the product. I've never heard of that in our industry, or any other for that matter; at best, it's reserved for tech startups ... which are generally funded in the millions or billions and can attract big-name talent ... until other people's money runs out.

Bisser said he had the Apples and Googles of the world in mind when he created LiveTrends' corporate culture.

"I wanted to make it a place where I can attract young people, professional people. Currently, the age in my office averages about 28, 29—I'm definitely the oldest guy, by far!" he added with a laugh. "To attract this kinds of people, we have to provide the environment for them to be together. So we have happy hours every Friday. We have a lot of events outside the office—we have tournaments, volleyball, baseball ... we run 5Ks together. We do so many things, and we encourage friendships in and out of the office ... Once you create this beautiful energy, people want to be a part of it."

Maintaining that "beautiful energy" requires careful hiring. Bisser said the barrier to entry at LiveTrends is "very high." Candidates typically get five interviews, plus some job shadowing and testing, before they're hired.

I know this sounds crazy in an age when you're lucky to get a warm body to stick around past lunchtime on their first day. But is it the worker? Or is it the workplace? What does your company's culture tell your staff—that you care about them as people? Or that you care about them as a means to an end? Is the happiness of your workforce your best advertisement for new ones? Or do you hope your older employees don't talk to the new ones and scare them off?

HR will never be easy. But perhaps looking at your people as a blessing rather than a curse is a first step toward creating a culture that attracts better people, who'll be more pleasurable to manage, which will further foster a culture that attracts better people, and so on and so on.

It kind of reminds me of something I heard years ago: "What if I train my people and they leave?"

"Yeah, but what if you don't train your people and they stay?" **GT**