GROWERTALKS

Features

4/30/2026

More Than Just a Number

Neal Glatt

Employee retention conversations in the green industry tend to circle around the same ideas: wages, schedules, workload and competition for labor. While all of these issues certainly affect the difficulty of retaining employees, there's another driver of retention that more directly determines whether employees stay through the toughest parts of the season or start looking elsewhere.

It comes down to whether people feel genuinely cared about.

Employees don't only want to be appreciated for what they produce or just recognized when they perform well, but to be authentically cared about as individuals. The distinction seems subtle, but has a significant impact on engagement and whether employees choose to stay.

Beyond saying "good job"

Recognition is its own performance-boosting tool because calling out great work reinforces standards and encourages repeat behavior. But recognition alone doesn't create loyalty. Employees can be recognized regularly and still feel disconnected from their manager and team. When that happens, retention becomes fragile, especially when the workload intensifies or another opportunity appears.

Feeling cared about as a person works differently. It builds the kind of connection that holds during stressful periods, busy seasons and inevitable setbacks. It creates a reason to stay that goes beyond pay or convenience. The foundation of that kind of care is surprisingly simple: taking the time to understand employees as people, not just as contributors in a role.

For employees, care starts with experiencing trust, understanding, fairness and authenticity from leaders and peers. These characteristics aren't created through policies or programs, but rather built through consistent, personal interactions that go beyond daily tasks.

In practical terms, that means knowing things that don't show up on a schedule, job description or employee file. Really caring about someone leads to conversations about family situations, hobbies and interests, personal goals, and beliefs and values that shape how someone approaches work. These can't be discovered in a forced or overly personal way, but through genuine curiosity over time.

For example, an employee working long hours during spring may also be balancing responsibilities at home or be distracted by illness in the family. Another may be working toward a long-term career goal that has nothing to do with

horticulture. Someone else may take pride in stability and consistency, while another is motivated by learning and growth. These differences matter because they shape what engagement looks like for each person.

Without that understanding, management tends to default to one-size-fits-all approaches with the same recognition, communication style and expectations for each individual. That's where gaps begin to form because while employees may perform, they may not fully connect. And when that connection is missing, retention becomes a constant challenge.

Recognizing the person, not just their performance

Getting to know employees happens in small, consistent moments. In some workplaces, that means a quick conversation at the start of a shift. Others have weekly touch-bases where caring leaders ask about something outside of work. Over time, remembering details from previous conversations and following up later builds a sense of continuity, which is one of the strongest signals that someone is valued beyond their output.

Recognition might sound like acknowledging a well-executed display or a strong sales day. Appreciation goes a step further by connecting that performance to the individual, like how their consistency, creativity or attention to detail contributes to the team, and why that matters based on what is known about them. The critical difference is that recognition reinforces behavior whereas appreciation reinforces identity.

Employees who feel seen for who they are, not just what they do, are more likely to stay engaged. They're also more likely to stay through challenging periods because the relationship with the team and manager carries weight.

Care most powerfully shows up through actions, not just conversations. The best managers adjust schedules when possible to support personal priorities or provide opportunities that align with someone's interests or strengths. They take time to listen when something isn't going well instead of immediately focusing on output. These moments often have a stronger impact on retention than any formal initiative.

Another important element is consistency. A single meaningful conversation doesn't build trust—just like a single frustrating interaction doesn't break it. When positive behaviors are consistent, employees feel more secure. People are more willing to speak up, share ideas and take ownership of their work when they trust the environment around them.

This has a measurable effect on operations. Teams with higher engagement communicate more effectively, solve problems faster and maintain stronger performance under pressure. More importantly, they retain their people. Turnover decreases not because employees have fewer options, but because they have stronger reasons to stay.

One of the most practical habits for reinforcing care is simply keeping track of what matters to each employee, including important dates, personal milestones, goals or challenges. Referencing these naturally in conversation shows that those details are remembered and valued. It doesn't require much time, but it has a lasting impact.

When an employee shares something important, revisiting it later reinforces that the conversation mattered. This is where many managers fall short—not from lack of intent—but from the pace of the business. Yet these small follow ups are often what employees remember most.

None of this replaces recognition best practices because teams still need clear, specific feedback on what's working and why. But when recognition is layered on top of genuine care, it becomes more meaningful. It feels less like a management tactic and more like a natural extension of the relationship.

In an industry where retention is often one of the biggest challenges, this approach offers a realistic path forward. It doesn't rely on adding perks or increasing costs. It relies on strengthening something that already exists in every operation: the relationship between managers and their teams.

When employees believe they are known, respected and supported as individuals, engagement rises. When engagement rises, retention follows. And when retention improves, the entire operation becomes more stable, more productive and better positioned to handle the demands of each season. **GT**

Neal Glatt is a Gallup Certified Strengths Coach and leadership consultant who partners with landscaping and horticulture businesses to drive growth through engaged teams and stronger sales. Learn more or book a call at NealGlatt.com.