

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Workplace Pals

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When it comes to social wellbeing, most managers will prioritize getting the physical job done first. Employees are there to do a job, customers need to be served, plants need to be watered, orders need to be shipped and there's plenty to accomplish without worrying about whether people like spending time together.

That sounds reasonable until considering how much of life is actually spent at work.

For employees in seasonal businesses, long days during peak periods can mean spending more waking hours with coworkers than with family or friends outside the business. Those relationships naturally become an important part of the work experience. When employees trust the people around them, enjoy working together and know someone has their back, work tends to feel very different.

Gallup research has found that employees who have a best friend at work are seven times as likely to be engaged in their jobs. Without a best friend at work, the chances of being engaged fall to one in 12. Yet only about 20% of employees surveyed by Gallup report intentionally spending time developing workplace friendships.

The phrase “best friend at work” can make some managers uncomfortable. It may sound like a recipe for too much socializing, workplace cliques or conversations happening when work should be getting done. But the real business issue isn't what friendships look like in practice as much as the fact that strong relationships create trust. That becomes especially important in the green industry, where so much work depends on employees relying on one another.

Building trust, budding friendships

A greenhouse employee needs to trust that a coworker will communicate a crop issue before it becomes a bigger problem. A garden center associate needs confidence that another employee will step in when a customer asks a question outside that associate's expertise. A delivery driver needs to believe the loading team prepared an order correctly. A seasonal employee needs to feel comfortable asking an experienced team member for help instead of quietly making a mistake.

There are three characteristics of a well-connected team: trust, teamwork and loyalty. Trust means confidence in another person's reliability. Teamwork means appreciating the talents coworkers bring and believing challenges can

be handled together. Loyalty means employees develop a meaningful commitment to the team itself. Those characteristics have very little to do with company picnics or forced team-building exercises, but instead grow through daily interactions.

One of the simplest places to start is giving employees more opportunities to actually know one another. A five-minute conversation before a meeting, recognizing a birthday or work anniversary, sharing lunch during a slower period, or simply allowing a little social interaction when customers aren't being neglected can make a difference. The goal isn't to manufacture friendships, but to create an environment where relationships have room to develop.

Managers play an important role in setting that tone. Sharing an occasional personal story about a career path, personal relationship or other background can make a manager more approachable and signal that conversations don't always have to be transactional. Employees are more likely to connect when the person leading the team demonstrates that connection is valued.

Pairing employees intentionally can also help. A garden center manager might assign two employees to reset a display rather than dividing the project into individual tasks. A growing operation could pair an experienced employee with someone newer while preparing a crop area. A landscape crew might rotate responsibilities so team members work alongside people outside their normal routine.

The immediate goal may be completing a task, but repeated shared experiences create familiarity. Familiarity can become trust and trust changes how a team performs when the pressure is on.

Dynamic temperature check

Managers should also pay attention to whether relationships are actually healthy. Regular check-ins can uncover team dynamics that are easy to miss from the office. Useful questions might include: Are there people on the team who can always be counted on? When has another team member helped make a difficult day easier? Or what could make this team work better together?

Another valuable question is: "When was work the most fun during the past few months?" That question may sound less serious than a conversation about productivity, but the answer can reveal a lot. Maybe the team enjoyed unloading a large shipment together because everyone jumped in. Perhaps employees liked preparing for a spring event because different departments worked side by side. Maybe a challenging installation became memorable because the crew solved problems together and laughed through the process. Those moments provide clues about the conditions that strengthen relationships and managers should then look for reasonable ways to create more of them.

There's an important caution, however—friendship cannot compensate for poor management. Employees still need clear expectations, proper tools, opportunities to use their strengths, recognition and managers who care about their performance. Otherwise, strong workplace relationships can simply become opportunities for employees to commiserate about everything that's wrong.

Managers looking to strengthen those relationships can begin with small habits. Create opportunities for employees to work in pairs. Protect occasional breaks where team members can eat or talk together. Celebrate milestones without turning every occasion into a major company event. Start meetings with something light before jumping into the task list. Ask employees which coworkers help them succeed and why. Pay attention to combinations of people who naturally work well together and create more opportunities for those complementary strengths to be used.

None of those ideas require a new program, committee or large budget. The biggest shift is simply recognizing that relationships aren't separate from performance, but rather part of the environment in which performance happens.

In an industry where busy seasons are intense, labor can be difficult to find and experienced employees are valuable, strong workplace relationships can become an important source of stability. Employees who trust one another communicate more freely, ask for help sooner, share ideas more comfortably and are more willing to step in when a teammate needs support.

Friendship at work doesn't need to be forced and managers can't assign anyone a best friend. But managers can create conditions where meaningful relationships are more likely to grow. When that happens, employees aren't simply working next to one another; instead they're working with people they trust. And during the busiest weeks of spring, that difference can matter a lot. **GT**

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