

A Culture of Mentoring: A SOLUTION TO THE BIGGEST PROBLEM FACING EMPLOYERS



Matt Hogarth, CTSP (far right), owner of Higher Ground Tree Care in Granger, Indiana, with crew members, from left, Joey Helmkamp, Derek Jacobs, CTSP, and Micah Smith. “It was midday and I was coaching and encouraging the guys,” says Hogarth. Photos courtesy of Matt Hogarth.

By Matt Hogarth, CTSP

Why is it we understand that if we want a piece of machinery to be reliable and operate at maximum output, then we need to do ongoing preventative maintenance? Yet, when it comes to our employees, we don’t always take such a proactive approach.

As I connect with fellow arborists from both large and small companies and from various geographical locations, one thing is clear: It’s hard to find and keep good employees. The complaints vary: “I keep hiring employees who don’t get it – they can’t show up on time, they are substance abusers, they are not trainable and the good ones quit and compete against me.” While there are many theories and ideas as to why this trend continues, one thing is clear – if we don’t change how we cultivate our people, it’s only going to continue to worsen.

Entrepreneur and author Richard Branson said, “Train employees well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so



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they don’t want to.” This quote obviously speaks to a broad issue regarding creating a healthy relationship in a business, and while there are no silver bullets to solve this issue, I do believe mentoring your employees is part of the solution that will, if consistent, pay off in the long run.

Here are some suggestions on how to proactively build a mentoring program to improve the company culture. Let’s get started!

Verbalize a mentoring culture

Start with the belief that people are looking for more than a job. Even if they are not in touch with that reality, people don’t want to simply “go to work.” Right from the outset, employees know this about my company. When interviewing prospective employees, I always tell them we have a mentoring culture – the response is usually excitement. Most of us want positive development as men and women, but we don’t know how to ask.

However, while everybody likes this idea, most get uncomfortable with the process because mentoring means, “I am going to be stretched” and “I am going to be held accountable for my growth.” Tell them when they are interviewing that this place is about more than a job – you intend to connect with them on a deeper level. Get to know your people. Assign a mentor to a new employee. They should have a personal touch (connection) outside of work at least once every seven to 10 days. Go to coffee, get a burger, etc. Have them

stay after work to do ... (you fill in the blank). That one-on-one time can be pivotal for growing a member of your team.

At some point in this relationship, you will build trust, which is the gateway to the new employee being vulnerable and willing to take risks that lead to his or her growth. If your employees know you care about them, then they are more likely to care about what you think of their performance, and this is the beginning of the best opportunity you have at them breaking bad habits and replacing them with healthy ones.

Professionalism means goals and boundaries

Mistakes are a catalyst for growth in a mentoring culture. Mentoring sets a high bar, establishes policies and procedures and then stays the course. What's more, our brains are often in a different place than our hearts. As such, it's not unusual that younger employees are not always in touch with what they want, which is often the opposite of what they say. This is why early-career professionals need boundaries, structure and consistency that are not influenced by the emotions of the moment.

Clear expectations, goals and established policies and procedures provide the structure needed to mold and develop employees. Employees get frustrated when they have internal stress as a result of "not knowing what's around the corner" or not knowing how they are going to be evaluated. This goes hand in hand with managers or owners being approachable and taking time out to care.

Are all your conversations "top down?" Are you, as a manager or owner, holding yourself accountable to your employees for your growth, too? Do your employees have a voice in their goals, how the work gets done or how they are rewarded for doing things with excellence? It is critical for managers and employees at all levels to understand and model the behavior desired by the organization.

Get connected

There is something powerful that happens when you get your team together outside of your geography, away from phones or other distractions. Planning work trips, going to an industry trade show or planning a fun trip for your team can be a bonding



Matt Hogarth, from left, Derek Jacobs and Micah Smith at TCI EXPO 2017 in Columbus, Ohio. "Every year I take the full-time tree crew members to EXPO or some other event. We also do one or two overnight work trips every year to connect," says Hogarth.

experience. Planning overnight trips, in particular, where you can huddle your team around a campfire, can add to the mentoring experience. This personal connectivity enables team members to "talk life," be vulnerable, bond and process individual issues they are struggling with.

When I have employees who move on, I do an exit interview to get my finger on the pulse of what went right or "not so right" for that employee. These "campfire" moments always come up as being some of the most impactful times. They always, without fail, want to discuss how they were treated. Considering the culture of mentoring is a big part of a healthy business culture, they end up expressing gratitude and hope that their next stop is as positive.

Perseverance through adversity leads to life change

Have you really grown as a person when things were going great? Most of us have to hit a wall of some sort, overcome the obstacle and persist at something in order to have growth in our lives. Mentoring breakthroughs happen when an employee perseveres through hardship and challenges, mental or physical. Of course, it is key to recognize this when it's happening and respond with the right amount of push and

encouragement.

In *Wild at Heart*, author John Eldredge discusses how this is a central part of turning "boys into men." One of the central themes in developing a positive self-image and confidence is overcoming obstacles. If a young man or woman has always been deprived of these experiences, there is a good chance they will be "thin-skinned adults" with little confidence or tenacity. Examples of what this can look like vary from overcoming adversity in academics or sports to doing something you didn't think was possible. The biggest impacts tend to be connected to constructively dealing with past hurts, fears or disappointments.

Recently, we had an 18-year-old who wanted to learn to climb trees working part time on a tree-removal crew. The problem was, he was so focused on the "cool factor" of being the guy in the tree that he didn't know he had a fear of heights. One day we told him to put on a climbing harness so we could have him retrieve a block left high in the tree. Once he hit 45 feet in his climb, he became paralyzed and said he was coming down. He wasn't about to go another inch. I told him coming down without that block (pulley) was not an option.

After both verbally pushing him and encouraging him, he started again and eventually retrieved the block. Once he

was back on the ground, he was elated that we made him stick with the climb. He was changed from that moment on. He had a new confidence, and he knew he had (hard-won) respect from his peers.

It's about growth, not gotcha

As leaders, it is hard for us not to be in gotcha mode when an employee commits a mistake, i.e., breaks a piece of equipment, hurts the bottom line, exercises poor judgment, etc. It seems to be human nature to want to punish behavior as a first response. It takes discipline to fight this initial response. While boundaries and logical consequences are a proper part of running a business or organization, how you handle a mistake often can lead to personal and professional growth in an employee.

Have you ever made a mistake and been treated better than you deserved? Maybe you were given some grace you didn't see coming. How did you respond? It probably motivated you to improve more than any consequence would have. However, this does not mean that employees can't or don't experience the appropriate penalties for their actions. Even with a healthy culture of mentoring people, you still have to hold employees accountable, and this means sometimes letting them go, especially when company policy indicates that level of response. But you have to take

risks on people for both you and them to be successful. That is, actively mentoring someone (your employee) will only work if you are willing to do it with the mindset that you may not benefit directly from it, but it may help the other person.

Mindset and serving others

If you want to see a culture of mentoring pay off in the long run, change has to start with you, the leader. Mentoring is only effective when you take on this mentality. This is an attitude that gives more than it receives, serving the needs of the employees and their personal growth even at the risk of some pain for its leader(s).

Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., in her book *Mindset*, explains how we all have either a fixed or growth mindset. People with growth mindsets tend to be successful because they are not only trainable by others but can engender change in their own lives. In short, we are asking employees to take on a growth mindset in order to break bad habits, create positive new ones, put others first, be responsible and so on. Ultimately, they *won't* risk doing this if they don't see you doing it as well.

A mentoring culture says that you will invest in their professional success even though they may leave. It costs money to do things right! We all know this, and it's frustrating to spend money training up a

talented employee only to see him or her leave. I once had an employee who I knew would eventually leave me, but I invested in him anyway. Why? Because this is the ultimate test of pouring into others.

Will you invest in someone even when it won't benefit you? If not, you are back to square one. That employee left me as I suspected, and is now probably competing against me for some of my jobs. But when he talks to friends, customers and other folks about me or my business, what does he say? If you want lower turnover, this is probably the most important thing to keep in mind. You develop a reputation that will send or keep strong candidates from coming to work for you. Bottom line: As leaders, we need to get to a place (emotionally) where we are as interested in the growth and advancement of our people as what they can do for us – even if it means you may get burned along the way!

Next in line

A reality in business, even when there is a healthy corporate culture and mentoring program in place, is that people leave. Another aspect to a proactive mentoring mindset is that you are looking to mentor people who may not work for you. Is there a young person who lives next door, goes to your church, is related to you who needs to be poured into? You might be mentoring a young man or woman who is currently not ready to be hired in your business, but might jump at the chance in one to two years. Or, the impact of your mentoring relationship may network you with a potential employee when the need arises.

Creating a culture of mentoring only works if your managers and leaders buy into the philosophy as well. Hire managers and leaders who have a heart for mentoring. When hiring my last crew leader, I made this the most important part of the hiring decision. I want to mentor people who want to mentor people. Which is easier to train or forge into an employee: attitude or skills? If one potential employee is amazing in the skill department but has little interest in connecting with the employees he or she is leading, he or she is not as desirable for the team as the lesser-skilled candidate who has a heart for pouring into his or her crew members.

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Nice, fat magazine

Thanks for including another article of mine (Arborist Forum: “Aerodynamics,” April 2019) in your magazine. It really is becoming such a thick monthly that I don’t always read it all. I think that is a good thing, that it is getting thicker.

Note: In the last few years, wherever I have worked, copies tended to float around for months in breakrooms and trucks. I think that’s an argument for keeping it paper for as long as you can!

Jack O’Shea
Certified Arborist
Oroville, California

Jack, you are welcome. Thank you for contributing.

The best way to keep the print version going is to renew your subscription every

Mentoring

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Remember, it doesn’t have to be just a job, but it starts with you, the leader or leaders in the organization. You have to make it known to everyone that this is as important to you and the business as doing tree work. You have to exude, “We can’t do one without the other.” This sends a message to your employees that building a profitable business starts with building a healthy company culture, which includes supporting each other.

If setting up a mentoring culture seems overwhelming, don’t focus on all the problems that may go into implementing change – just get going. Get started! At the end of the day, we should simply be living out a mindset that says, “I am here to serve others.”

In closing, if we do the hard work of mentoring, it will eventually pay off in ways that are hard to imagine. You will receive great satisfaction in seeing and affecting the lives of others in a way you didn’t know existed. After all, we are not only in the tree business, we are in the people business.

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Don Staruk, editor

Call Back ...

In the “On the Cover” box on page 8 in the April 2019 issue of *TCI Magazine*, we neglected to provide proper credit to professional photographer Sarah Toney for the photo of Rhonda Wood. We regret the omission.



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