

Personnel Management in Propagation: Report on the Mary Helliard Travel Scholarship 1997

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INTRODUCTION

In all sectors of the European horticulture industry, including propagation, it is becoming more and more difficult to recruit good technical staff. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to ensure that, once an organisation has recruited good people, it is able to keep them. While much research has been undertaken on the technical aspects of plant propagation, little has been recorded about the equally important aspect of personnel management. This study attempts to redress this imbalance, by reporting the findings of a study trip to the West Coast of North America to look specifically at personnel management in propagation.

The report is based on a total of 15 nurseries visited, from Washington in the north, through Oregon, and finishing in California. The West Coast of North America was chosen because the nurseries there have an international reputation for technical innovation and are also very successful at implementing techniques in personnel management.

MANAGEMENT STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Most of the 15 nurseries had a traditional tiered management structure, while a few had changed to a flatter structure.

Tiered Management. This structure has clearly defined roles and written rules. Often managerial action is governed by conformity to procedures and "custom practice". Management monitors and controls the work force based on the assumption that managers and workers have very different interests, with managers being concerned about company profits and staff being concerned about their individual wages. My observations on this tour revealed this attitude is changing. As workers or staff become more assertive and show that they are willing to take on more responsibility, they are being recognised, supported, and encouraged by managers to do so.

Flatter Management. Some organisations are developing management structures which seem to have fewer top level managers and more middle level managers and supervisors. Where it has been introduced it has been a success and the benefits include better communication and less bureaucracy with staff enjoying being on a more equal footing. Generally speaking, management policies in these organisations reflect an individual approach with rewards and opportunities being linked to individual effort assessed by the performance appraisal method.

Some of the nurseries visited appeared to successfully combine these two approaches. As the industry changes, it is likely there will be a swing over to the more humanistic flatter management structure. However, if in an individual business the change is too sudden, benefits could be short lived. The most obvious problem could be the loss of morale and commitment that can affect those who remain in an organisation which may be having to increase productivity with fewer people.

RECRUITMENT

Generally speaking, propagation technical staff are recruited by the propagation manager. Most of the propagators and managers in the survey said it was becoming increasingly difficult to find good staff. Some nurseries have had to resort to employment agencies to recruit staff.

On most of the nurseries in this study, Hispanic people make up the main complement of the work force, although these workers tend to be more settled in California than further north in Oregon and Washington. One of the reasons for this is California's proximity to Mexico and the fact that the diversity of horticulture there can provide many of them with year-round work.

Nurseries in the states of Oregon and Washington have not been employing or relying on the Hispanic work force for as long as those in California, but this situation is changing rapidly.

Staff are recruited by various different means, including: advertisements placed in local newspapers, existing staff recommending relatives or friends looking for work, and recruitment agencies.

Recommendation, however, appears to be by far the most popular method and seems to work well because the responsibility of recommending someone good rests with the existing employee.

In some nurseries new recruits are expected to fill in questionnaires to help discover hidden talents. This simple yet effective questionnaire is a useful tool for propagators and managers to find the right staff and fit them into the work for which they are best suited. For example:

- What kinds of work have you done in the past?
- Have you ever worked with plants?
- Have you ever watered or irrigated?
- Have you ever planted?
- Do you like to:
 - Do construction work?
 - Do cement or brick work?
 - Do plumbing?

At Hines Nurseries of Vacaville they say, "unused talents never grow". Finding people's hidden talents and getting them to use them to their full potential is the aim.

The majority of nurseries visited, especially the larger companies such as Briggs Nurseries, Hines, Monrovia, and Skagit, provide job descriptions so that new recruits know what is expected of them.

In the U.S.A., health and safety are a very important part of working life. It is not unusual for new recruits to spend their first day entirely being briefed on health and safety guidelines. The onus is put very much on the staff to behave and work responsibly or suffer the consequences.

There is a shortage of good skilled propagators, especially those with a proven track record, in the U.S.A. For this reason skilled horticulturists and propagators are well paid and highly regarded in the industry.

INDUCTION AND TRAINING

Staff training is vital to the success of any business and without competent staff who have been trained to do the job, productivity suffers and quality becomes indifferent. Such is the structure of the larger nurseries visited, that there would not be enough

skilled staff to oversee an unskilled workforce. The emphasis is therefore on teaching, even the general workers, the basic skills to do the job and be accountable for their work.

Induction is more or less the first real training that new recruits gain. It is mainly about rules, guidelines, and orientation and it is the time when they are made familiar with the employee handbook. On most nurseries visited, these handbooks are very comprehensive and informative. There seems to be little funding or support from government agencies for the training of staff in these nurseries.

In one particular nursery, staff are trained to set standards for safety, quality, productivity, housekeeping, and team development. From day one they are trained using the "buddy" system, which involves pairing up an established worker with a new recruit. New recruits are not required to work on their own for the first 2 months, the time they are given to reach the required standards.

On the majority of nurseries, for staff who show initiative, training is available at all levels from management training, to in-house training for basic communication skills.

Hispanic workers are encouraged to learn English to improve their working life, their communication skills, and their promotion prospects. Equally, U.S.A. workers are encouraged to become bilingual in English and Spanish.

In the U.K. "Total Quality Management" (TQM) and "Investors in People" (IiP) are commonplace throughout the nursery industry. In the United States TQM is widespread, but nurseries seem to have changed and adapted it to suit their own individual situations and make it more relevant to their staff. The nurseries who have invested in this area really stand out. It shows in consistency of quality of the product and most importantly in the attitudes of the staff themselves.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

After staff retention, health and safety is the single most important issue for nursery management in the U.S.A. Health and safety committees are run by staff and departments meet monthly to discuss improving the safety, safety awareness, and general health of fellow workers. At Hines Nurseries a health and safety awareness day is scheduled every week and all key people wear yellow T-shirts to emphasise the day.

On most of the nurseries surveyed, propagators and managers take health and safety issues very seriously and, being good people-managers, they make the welfare of their staff their top priority.

COMMUNICATION

All the American managers and staff I met on this tour were great communicators. I met many propagators and growers who, for the most part, were open, honest, and uninhibited, when it came to communicating with me or members of their team. I was constantly told that "people are the greatest resource" in the nursery, not the "greatest expense", as so many people in Europe often seem to see it. Most nursery managers I met also seemed to feel that it was important to communicate positively; there is no point preaching doom and gloom. If you have something negative to say, turn it into something positive, by coming up not only with a problem but with a solution.

Good communication was ensured by involvement of staff at all levels, a high degree of mutual respect between staff and managers, encouragement of participation, and by getting the message across that good communication is to the benefit of everyone.

MOTIVATION

To be highly motivated one needs to like what one is doing and be happy in one's work environment. On the tour I met very dedicated propagation staff who put in long hours and take ownership of their crops because they enjoy it and, sometimes, because if they don't no one else will. Some say propagation is like a vocation, in the extreme it takes you over and you are swept along. It's like an obsession.

Money, of course, is also a motivating factor, but by no means the main one. Those working in propagation know horticulture is not the best paid industry in which to have a career — but that's not why they became propagators. Profit share is common on most of the nurseries visited, both large and smaller businesses. This not only provides a bonus on top of salary, it gives staff a stronger sense of belonging and instills greater commitment. They can own a part of the business in a way, and it places the success of the business in their hands.

HOW PROPAGATION MANAGERS MOTIVATE STAFF

Managers and propagators of the nurseries visited said this was sometimes difficult. Because well motivated staff are so hard to come by, every nursery employs some staff who are only there "because it is a steady job". Although there are struggles with staff who are set in their ways, efforts are made to encourage and motivate them, especially when it comes to upgrading and promotion. If they show willingness, they have the potential to earn more money. From the beginning it is important to establish and maintain the trust and support of your staff and your managers, by creating and maintaining effective working relationships.

COMMITMENT AND EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

Because commitment is important to the success of the business, managers of the nurseries studied feel that employee involvement at all levels is the way forward. Those in charge of propagation say that providing opportunities for staff to meet with management, through membership on committees and arranged social gatherings, encourages involvement and sends signals to individuals that they are valued. Managers of some nurseries believe that commitment from staff comes from having strong clear messages. These include business mission statements and policies but it is important that management actions follow these statements and policies. Low staff commitment can show itself in high labour turnover, high absenteeism, and poor performance.

Team briefing, or downward communication as it is also known, is a system operated by U.S.A. management. Its objective is to make sure that all employees know and understand what they and others in the company are doing and why. It is about leaders and their teams getting together in groups for about a half an hour on a weekly basis to talk about things that are relevant to their work. These meetings reinforce management by differentiating team leaders from their people and reminding them and their team that they are accountable for the group's performance. This increases commitment by setting clear objectives and giving feedback on performance. These meetings also improve upward communication by relating problems to people's jobs, thereby making them more likely to voice suggestions for solving them.

At Monrovia Nursery, a suggestion box inviting employees to submit new ideas to improve company performance has a successful history. The company rewards staff who come up with good suggestions and ideas for improvements. This idea helps to identify employees who may have creative or lateral thinking skills so that their talents can be put to better use, making them in turn feel more committed.

STAFF WELFARE

Welfare is driven by organisational needs, providing benefits that employees value and which simultaneously link with the needs of the nursery.

Stress. The managers of the nurseries studied aim to identify signs of stress in individual employees as early as possible. Steps can be taken to help individuals, and where necessary and possible, note is taken of an employee's limits. Stress is identified as a common reason for absenteeism.

Stress is also thought to influence levels of staff turnover. Most of the larger nurseries I visited had a human resource manager who deals with staff welfare and is available to staff at all times. The majority of the nurseries visited provide health insurance to full-time members of staff (and in certain cases, to specified family members of the employee).

CONCLUSIONS

The nurseries visited varied in size from 6-ha companies employing up to 15 people to the other extreme of 200-ha companies employing 450 people. Some propagators seem to like the smaller family-type nursery where everyone knows each other. On the other hand, propagators from the larger companies find the larger-scale operations more of a challenge. The support of a good team makes it all possible.

Skilled propagators are held in very high regard throughout the nursery industry of the West Coast of the U.S.A. I am told there is a shortage of skilled people and in some cases poaching of propagators goes on. The lure of better pay and conditions can be a temptation. However, the majority of propagators I met were very devoted to their jobs and value the good working relationships they have with fellow managers and staff.

Overall the study tour has revealed some very valuable things about how to manage staff, what motivates them, and how to get commitment. American and Hispanic propagators have a great sense of humour and are good communicators. They are as tuned into their people as they are to their plants. One propagator said to me: "We don't just grow plants here, we help people grow too." This may be a useful lesson for all nurseries.

A full report of the Study Tour, together with a list of nurseries studied, is available to sponsors of the Mary Helliard Travel Scholarship. Details may be obtained from the GB&I Region Secretary. The author wishes to acknowledge all current sponsors for their part in making the study possible.