

Dos & Don'ts Of Landscape Design-Build



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Practices to embrace and mistakes to avoid for project success.

I have had the great fortune of working in the Green Industry for over 45 years (I started when I was very young!). In that time, I have had the great honor of working at some incredible companies, with leaders of the industry, and in all parts of the country. I have learned many lessons on how to be successful in design-build. More importantly, I have learned mistakes to avoid (and yes, I have made some big ones myself). I could fill a book with these lessons, but here I will provide just some highlights.

Sales

I started my career designing and selling landscape design-build projects. I will start with some lessons I learned that still stick with me. These principles apply to those starting off in the Industry as well as owners hiring people new to the Industry.

Do work as an apprentice. When I was hired for my first job, I worked as an apprentice to Tom Lied, one of the founders of the National Association of Landscape Professionals (which was ALCA at the time) and a great designer and businessperson. This proved to be a better route than being thrown to the wolves and making a lot of mistakes. Learning the design-sales process in a sheltered environment was invaluable. In the six months I collaborated with Tom, I developed a solid foundation. If you are hiring a new design salesperson, I encourage you to introduce them to the position by having them collaborate with a senior member of your team. It will pay dividends in a short period of time.

Don't "beg" for the job. When just starting my design career, I was hungry to get involved in some larger projects. I went on a new call and the clients told me they wanted to add a pool, a large patio, and extensive screen

plantings. I was literally salivating at the prospect of landing this project. Apparently, the client was astute enough to see that I really wanted the job and flat out said, "I can see that you really want to work on this project. How bad do you want it?" I told the client that I would waive the design fees and give him some preferential pricing on the job. (Big mistake!)

Two days later when I checked in with the client, I was devastated to learn that he went with one of our competitors. When I asked him why he did not choose me and our company, he said, "I could see that you were too desperate to get the job. I was unsure if you could handle it." This story has a happy ending though. The client ended up hiring me two years later to "fix" the other contractor's mistakes based on a great referral he received from an associate.

Don't have preconceived ideas of a project. Another mistake I made early in my career was to think I knew what the client wanted before asking them. For instance, I once drove up to a fantastic lakefront English Tudor and saw the front of the house obscured by large, overgrown Pfitzer junipers. I knew immediately that they had to go. I rang the bell and started doing a walk through with the client. Before the client could get a sentence out of her mouth, I said, "I know why you called us—you want to get rid of those ugly, overgrown junipers." She looked at me in shock and said, "I could never get rid of those junipers. My mother planted them and I have been trimming them into beautiful Bonsai shapes for years!" Needless to say, I did not get that project.



(Photo: Adobe Stock / Pixel-Shot)

Project Management

As my career evolved, I became more involved in management, first taking on departmental management and ultimately divisional management. I quickly realized I needed to acquire a broader set of business skills. My degrees in landscape architecture and horticulture did not prepare me for the larger roles I was taking on in the companies I worked for.

Do learn financial management. As my responsibilities grew, I started feeling like a fish out of water when it came to financial management. While my degree in Horticulture included just a few business courses, my Landscape Architecture degree didn't include any. Luckily, two of the companies I worked for used Frank H. Ross as a financial consultant. (Ross is a highly regarded financial consultant for contractors and a partner in 3PG Consulting.)

Frank would come in twice a year to work with us on budgeting and pricing. I learned how to build a 12-month rolling budget, what my breakeven costs were, and how to price our projects to not only cover overhead, but to make a nice profit on the work we did. Every time Frank came in, I felt I was getting an MBA in Finance! No matter where you get your financial education from, I encourage you to make it a priority. This is where you can best impact your business.

Do timely job costing. While having a solid budget and accurate profit/loss (P&L) statements is critical to your success, there is one thing that I feel trumps both. That is timely job costing. When you receive your P&L for the previous month, it's actually "old news." You have performed a lot of work, and this is a look in the rearview mirror on what happened out in the field. You may have beat budget, or you may have lost money, but it's often difficult to pinpoint where gains or losses occurred. This is where accurate and timely job costing comes in. By tracking actual labor and material costs and comparing it to the estimate on your project, it gives you a timely snapshot of how your team is performing. Job costing should be done weekly at a minimum. Some of the new software will allow you to track your job costs daily.

Accurate and timely job costing will give you the opportunity to make mid-course adjustments on projects. This is better than seeing you lost money over the past month and not being able to do anything but ask, "What happened?!" Job costing is critical as projects get larger and larger. A bust on a million-dollar job can sink a company!

Do build systems and processes. I work with companies across the country and it's common to see owners who have grown their companies to a certain point—but then the company plateaus. No matter how hard they work, or how many hours they put in, they can't get over the hump. The main reason for this is there are no systems or processes to follow.

Typically, the owner—or a couple key supervisors—know the process to complete a task or build a project in the field. The problem is this knowledge is often stored in their heads. This means the owner, or supervisor, can seldom

get away during the busy season. Worse yet, if a key supervisor leaves the company, then guess what? All that vast knowledge leaves with them.

The key is to build systems and processes for all critical services the company performs and document them. This actually needs to start from the moment a prospect calls into your company for potential work. There should be a process on how the call is answered, what questions are asked, and what happens with that lead. The systems and processes not only need to be written and documented, but cross trained through-out the company. If enacted, when a key person leaves, you will not also be losing a great deal of critical information. Better yet, with processes in place, the company will grow dramatically!

Professional Development

Do learn to delegate. There are many aspects of professional development that will help you and your company grow. One of the most critical ones is learning how to delegate. If you don't learn the art of delegation, you will be the largest impediment to your company's growth.

When I accepted the invitation to become the president of ALCA (now NALP), I knew I would have to be out of the office for close to two-thirds of the year. At the time, I was still heavily involved in design and sales. I felt I had to be there every day to not only design and sell new projects, but to manage the projects I sold. I never considered taking a vacation during the busy season. Becoming the president of ALCA forced me to change. It forced me to:

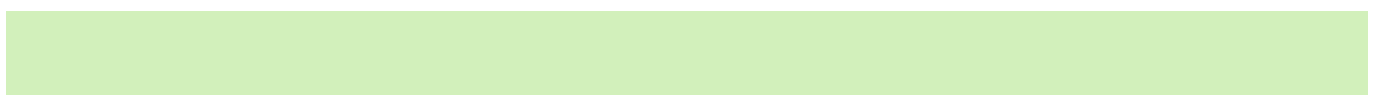
- Fully complete the paperwork on my projects.
- Have all materials selected and sourced in advance.
- Ensure all my plans were accurate and detailed.
- Designate another designer to stay connected with the client.
- Assign a project manager to oversee the job in the field in my absence.

I should have been doing all these things anyway, but I always used the excuse that I would be there to answer any questions. *Not* doing these things drove the production team crazy!

By detailing my projects in advance and delegating functions to others, two important things happened:

1. The projects ran smoother and were more profitable.
2. The team members that I delegated management duties to grew and matured, while proving they could take on more responsibility.

For these reasons, I encourage you to learn the art of delegation now, before it's a "must."



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As you can imagine, I have many other stories to share, but I feel these provide the most return on investment. Use some of the things I've experienced over the years to start growing your career and/or business now. It will shorten your learning curve and allow you to achieve success sooner!



Griggs is Head Harvester at [The Harvest Landscape Consulting Group](#), where he offers consulting, education, and design-build peer groups to enhance the selling, management, and profit of projects. With over 45 years of design-build experience and perspective, he has personally managed more than \$75M in design-build sales. Additionally, Griggs has developed marketing programs that increase revenue by over 30% in one year. The Harvest Group Landscape Consulting currently does business in 42 states and five countries working with landscape business owners to increase their sales, grow their bottom line, and sell their company when ready.

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