

If The Shoe Fits



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Landscape contractors can enhance efficiency and long-term success by better defining organizational roles and responsibilities

By Tim Smith



Like any good businessperson, a landscape contractor might explore a number of ways to improve their company. Enhancements could be made to sales processes, customer relations and even jobsite performance. But, another underlying factor in the overall operation of a business that contractors would be wise to address is making sure people in the organization are wearing the right hats to appropriately utilize their individual talents.

It's an issue that essentially boils down to worrying less about job titles and placing the real emphasis on specific "roles" and responsibilities within the company.

The founders of a landscaping business will commonly start off doing anything and everything needed for day-to-day operations. However, as companies grow larger, it's impractical for contractors to have the time to properly handle all these responsibilities. It can take a toll, from the physical or emotional aspect of wearing a person down to the business inefficiencies of failing to give every task adequate attention.

Time availability is only one part of the equation. Contractors should also consider whether they truly have the right people performing the correct roles to match their strengths. For example, a person may excel in a variety of areas, such as sales, account management and design. Even so, narrowing that person's focus and assigning the remaining job functions to others with the appropriate skills may better serve the company. All things being equal, a person naturally will be more effective and do better work by fulfilling their one or two strongest roles, instead of spreading themselves thin across

multiple roles that may or may not suit their abilities.

In other cases, individuals within a company have simply absorbed workload as necessary over the years, rather than taking on responsibilities in a structured way. Some people are content with this scenario "as long as the job gets done," but ultimately the lack of structure will lead to some degree of chaos, either from people stepping on each other's toes or from work falling through the cracks when assumptions are made about who is doing what.

Role transitions

When looking to appropriately assign roles within a landscaping company, one might wonder what the real difference is between job titles and roles. The key differentiator within the LandOpt network is that all roles have written descriptions and clear definitions for each role to be fulfilled. In fact, every LandOpt contractor has gone through the process of adjusting and assigning roles based on this structure. Each contractor within the network essentially has the same roles and same functions assigned to those roles.

Miller Landscape, Inc., Orion, Mich., is just one of many companies with experience in role adjustments. As the team at Miller can attest, getting a solid handle on roles has had an immediate impact, while also better positioning the company for its long-term goals.

"Developing and defining roles helped us determine which people in the company are the best fits for those roles," said Jeremy Miller, general manager for Miller Landscape. Miller's brother Marty is an account manager and estimator, and their dad Bob is an estimator and overall subject matter expert, while their uncle Bill is a sales professional, estimator and designer.

The company has found that individuals are not only able to maintain better focus on their assigned responsibilities, but that the increased emphasis on specific tasks gives them the freedom and flexibility to do their jobs exceedingly better than before.

"We used to be jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none," said Bill. "Once I took myself out of project work and day-to-day operations, I could focus on the design and sales aspects-the things I was really good at. Consequently, those parts of the business have grown dramatically as I've given them proper attention."

In addition to the effect on overall business, the assigning and/or reduction of roles also turned out to be a natural complement to another long-term transition Miller Landscape has been gradually moving toward: passing ownership to the second generation.

"Once we defined what we were good at and put people in place, Bob and I could see the potential for the business to move on without us," said Bill. "In particular, we felt Jeremy had a vision for where the company could go. It's crucial for the next generation to see we're willing to step aside and give them authority and the responsibility that goes with it."

To aid its transition, Miller Landscape adopted the concept of acting as though the owners were no longer everyday players in the company. "Once a month, I present the owners with sales goals and budgets as though they aren't here on a daily basis," said Miller. "It helps us get a feel for our organizational structure once they have retired."

Life with roles

The process of identifying appropriate roles will vary from one contractor to the next. Some companies will find they can cover all the necessary responsibilities by promoting or re-assigning existing personnel, while others may have to look outside the organization to fill certain roles. Regardless of the exact approach, it's an exercise that can make life easier on everyone in a company. By empowering people with new responsibilities and relieving others of unnecessary burdens, landscape contractors can quickly improve their internal structure and approach future growth in a more organized and efficient manner.

Tim Smith is president and CEO of LandOpt, LLC, a dynamic service organization that licenses the use of proven business systems and processes for a large network of successful lawn care and landscape service providers. LandOpt's business operating system incorporates components of technology, processes and professional development, all of which are supported by ongoing implementation services.

Photo caption: Bob, Jeremy and Bill Miller can attest that getting a solid handle on roles has had an immediate impact, while also better positioning their company, Miller Landscape, for its long-term goals.