

Sticking to its Core Values



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Duke's Landscape Management upgrades its hiring practices to attract only quality employees



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Looking out the windows of this New Jersey office building you can see at a glance the care that this Duke's Landscape Management employee provides in mowing this campus.

Photos courtesy of Duke's Landscape Management.

When managers of Duke's Landscape Management looked out into the parking lot of their northern New Jersey headquarters one day three years ago, what they saw triggered a turnaround in their hiring procedures.

"Half of our trucks were parked. That was the beginning of the end of the H2B (seasonal guest worker) program for us when we realized that it was unpredictable," recalls Tanya King, human resources manager and safety director. One of King's responsibilities, after joining the company eight years ago, was to train Hispanic workers. She speaks Spanish.

"We were getting guys who were really, really good and hard working. We were getting really good staff and they would stay from season to season, which was ideal for us," says King, adding that workers helped find other good workers, people they could vouch for such as their family members. "It seemed like a really great system."

Duke's Landscape Management

President: Eric Cross

Founded: 1986

Headquarters: Hackettstown, N.J.

Markets: Parts of Pennsylvania to New York City and northern New Jersey

Services: Landscape maintenance, design/build and snow removal

Employees: 60 (80 in season)

Website: <http://www.dukeslm.com>

But in 2010 the H2B system started to get burdened with government regulation and Duke's Landscape Management didn't get its H2B workers until June that year, she says. "We had these great guys in Costa Rica and Mexico and we wouldn't get them here. With them was all of the valuable information about our sites, the clients and property knowledge. All of that cultural information about our company was someplace else," she continues.

There was much at stake: Duke's Landscape Management provides services to more than 7,000 condominium units and more than 1,100 acres of commercial and residential properties. That presented a problem that didn't appear to have a short-term solution, so the company began to wean itself from the program.

Duke's is headquartered in Hackettstown, N.J., which is located about 50 miles northwest of New York City and about the same distance northeast of Philadelphia. While much of the region surrounding Hackettstown is rural, the number of hard-working local "farm kids" willing to work for a landscape company, once a resource for the company, has dried. When the economy was fairly healthy, "those hard-working farm kids we had always loved became harder to find," King notes. Couple that with the problems with the H2B program and the company realized it had to become better at attracting and retaining employees, especially field foremen.



"We realized that what we needed to do was get guys who had zero landscape experience but a really strong work ethic and build them into the foreman we needed, because trying to find foremen was not working for us," King says. The company realized it had to improve its hiring process to attract better candidates.

"We would put an ad out, people would come in and I'd look at their resume and say, 'OK, you'd be really good, you seem like a hard worker.' They would get here and there would be a disconnect between their resume and actual skills," she says. "What we do now is we ask questions during our interview process that tries to elicit a response that would match our core values."

Those core values are:

- Honesty: speaking truth and creating trust in the minds of others.
- Enthusiasm: intense enjoyment or interest.

- Respectful: showing your esteem for a person or entity through actions and feelings.
- Knowledgeable: skills acquired by a person through experience or education and/or desire to gain such skills.
- Problem-solving skills: ability to solve problems as they come up and adapt your work as you do.
- Efficient: performing or functioning in the best possible manner with the least waste of time and effort.
- Dependability: a value showing the reliability of a person to others because of his/her integrity, truthfulness and trustfulness.
- Team Player: can be counted on to do his or her part of the work and be relied on to complete tasks and work cooperatively with others.

Another value important at Duke's Landscape Management is initiative. "If they are done with their prescribed task, they might look to weed the bed. They have an eye for detail, of their own volition, not waiting for their employer to come and tell them to do that. They would know that," says King.

Making the grade

To determine a potential employee's initiative, King will ask them to describe a point in their career where they had saved their company money.

"Some people will say immediately to me, 'I make sure that I price things out or I make sure that I don't waste time. I try to be efficient.' No matter what their job was, they tell me about the little things they do to save pennies. Someone else might answer, 'I don't think I really did save my company money' and they couldn't come up with an answer, so they would not be a good match for our company," explains King. "Every one of our core values matches to our questions to make sure that they have some sort of experience and meet the culture of our company even before they step foot in our building."

A video on the company's website captures for jobseekers a day in the life of Duke's Landscape Management, and managers discuss a typical day and the expectations they have of employees.

"We expect dedication, and loyalty is a two-way street for us," adds Eric Cross, CEO. "Before we hire them, we want them to see this video so they get a feel for what this is all about. It cuts down on the turnover." The company also pays a \$500 finder's fee to an employee who recruits someone as a foreman that lasts with the company at least 90 days.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

These small islands of professionally maintained seasonal ornamentals beautify this commercial property.

Rewards for performance

It's not all take, take, take with Duke's Landscape Management. The company

rewards employees for good performance.

"When we have a good year, we put money into a bonus program that they share, and it's very much top heavy. The top three guys get half of the bonus and the next five or six foremen get the other half and then the bottom half don't get any bonus at all," explains Cross.

But there are other perks for loyal and hard-working employees, too. For example, this fall the company gave them turkeys and pies. Then there's the big company party at the end of the season. "We do things throughout the year to make sure the guys know that they are appreciated," Cross says.

The company also ensures the employees have good equipment to help them do their jobs. "We made a big investment in modernizing our fleet and equipment for the guys so they can do the job more efficiently and safely," Cross says. "They love getting a new truck. We give it to the guys who are performing the best. It's like a reward."

Duke's Landscape Management uses Exmark mowers, RedMax two-cycle trimmers and blowers, STIHL chain saws and Ford trucks. The company's two full-time mechanics do maintenance and repairs in-house.

Service is bottom line

The company stresses customer service in its structured company-wide training program.

"We really turned a corner with this with everybody understanding how important our customers are and that they do have choices. We have customers who have been our customers for such a long time that the guys sometimes forget there are competitors out there that would love to get a shot at their portfolio. It's a constant message from us that every day we have to earn our customers' trust," says Cross. "We are never done training."

King echoes that philosophy. "Every part of what we do is thanks to our clients, so our training is expressing to our foremen as well as our crew members how it is that we can provide excellent customer service to them. We talk about what's important to our clients so it's important to them (employees). That's one of the things that we're constantly reiterating in new ways so I know that they're getting it, they're understanding it and it's part of the culture."

The company is fine-tuning its training program to resemble that of the hospitality industry, say at the level of a Ritz Carlton hotel. "They obviously have a reputation of really taking care of their customers," says Cross. "I've always said to our guys if we can be known as giving the best customer service in the industry, our sales will take care of themselves."

Cross is a big believer in sustainability as it relates to his company's services. He is accredited in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).

"We are the green industry," he points out. "Our clients are very interested

in it. These properties are under such pressure from a budget standpoint that you've really got to make sense of going green, not just for environmentalist point of view, but make sense from dollars and cents, too. We want to be able to position ourselves as experts in the industry."

Duke's Landscape Management partners with its clients in their mission to go green. "We'll do a presentation to a property management company on the latest as to what's going on with LEED and IPM programs and the new fertilizer laws in New Jersey," Cross says. For those clients who request it, the company will use organics, although Cross says that the company has been unable to create a turf program that's 100 percent organic and effective.

Other sustainability efforts include working with clients to evaluate irrigation and how water is being used on their properties, managing weeds and plant diseases by using research-based approaches, using low-emission equipment, recycling oil from larger machines into a used oil furnace to heat the company's workshop and recycling green waste into compost on the company's property.

The honor roll

The company's customer service efforts and the attention to detail it demonstrates in its landscape projects are reflected in the 30 state and national awards that it has earned over the years.

"We like to find out what the issues are that our clients are dealing with," says Cross, rather than the typical approach of selling features and benefits.

There had been a time when Duke's Landscape Management, like other companies, would get specifications for a job, measure the property, punch the numbers into estimating software and come up with a price. Now, potential clients dictate what want they to spend "and the first person to raise their hand gets the job," Cross notes.

"We're sticking to what we do well, large properties and relationships where we can make sure if we spent extra time on a property, we know there's value there because we'll get more work," he says.

The company is pursuing continued growth, looking for ways to create more density from its routes.

"We want to continue to make this a good place to work, that's a short- and long-term goal," he says. "I want to make sure people recommend this place to friends and family as a good place to work. If we can do that and be known as the company that provides the best customer service in the industry, everything else is easy."

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