

# There's No Substitute for Safety



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**David Snodgrass says the industry is making progress with safety but has more work to do**

Recently, I chatted about on-the-job safety with David Snodgrass, president of Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping and Garden Center. I visited with him at his Portland, Ore., headquarters, which are located in a small industrial park just off a winding two-lane road, about a 15-minute drive from city center.

Snodgrass has a passion for the landscape industry and also for work-related safety. Evidence of both passions permeates this \$25-million, 260-employee, family-owned company. The first indication of his company's focus on safety is evident to any visitor driving through the company's front gate. Several bold large signs remind anybody entering the grounds to be safe and to work safely.

This attention to safety is one of many reasons why Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping and Garden Center is a model green industry company. Its marshaling yard is spacious and orderly – at least in comparison to most other companies that receive and dispatch work crews in trucks or trucks with trailers loaded with landscape equipment. The company's headquarters building, which management designed to meet the company's specific requirements, is clean, well-lit and neatly divided into sections where managers of the company's various divisions can collaborate and work together quietly and efficiently.

Snodgrass greeted me warmly, just after light heartedly shooing off a small group of managers he had been conferring with in the company conference room. A tiny, short-coated dog of indeterminate breed eyed me, the unfamiliar newcomer, suspiciously before losing a short burst of comically threatening barks in our direction.

Then we got down to business: discussing why and how the landscape/lawn service industry must continue to increase awareness of safety. Soon the discussion turned to why it's vitally important for each and every company to

instill a culture of safety within itself. Snodgrass, his managers and his employees walk the talk when it comes to safety. And their safety awareness is vastly more comprehensive than the morning stretches that every employee (hourly, salaried or owner) starts each workday. Even team members who start the day on clients' properties away from company headquarters stretch with fellow employees before beginning their duties.

✖ Every work day at Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping and Garden Center starts with morning stretches for every employee at the company. This includes managers.

Snodgrass chaired the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) Safety Committee for more than six years, and at decade's end served as president of PLANET. While leading the Safety Committee, he and fellow committee members initiated and oversaw the explosive growth of one of PLANET's and the industry's most important programs – STARS, which is the acronym for Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success.

Measuring the true value of STARS to the industry is impossible. How can you explain what could have happened in terms of lost fingers, etc., but didn't happen because employees were trained (and reminded) to turn off power tools, such as mowers and trimmers, before servicing them? How do you put a number to injuries avoided because you had clear procedures and insisted that your employees inspect their service vehicles and equipment trailers, and that they practice defensive driving at all times and in all road conditions?

Obviously, you can't possibly know what misfortune your participation in STARS and subsequent safety training and reminders prevented. It's enough to conjecture that it almost certainly has – even if it was a single accident. Learn more about STARS and how to become a part of the greater industry effort to practice safety, including how to make your company a safer place to work by visiting [www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org).

**Initially, what caused you to become involved with the PLANET Safety Committee, ultimately leading to the creation of STARS?**

When I started, the idea was to accomplish a slight shift to get the industry moving in the right direction and to get the momentum going. Actually, it might have been the perfect time to become involved with safety because few companies within the industry seemed to be taking it seriously then. At the time, we talked a lot about quality and efficiency, and those two things seemed to dictate how most people ran their companies. Safety seemed to be an afterthought. Ideally, the culture within a landscape company should give equal emphasis to quality, efficiency and safety.

✖ Employee training focuses on every aspect of the business, from safe driving habits to the proper and safe operation of landscape equipment.

**Tell us about your involvement on the committee.**

The committee put out the STARS program. It was fun to be at that place at the right time and for us to deliver real value to the industry. That's how I viewed our committee's work at the time. My vision, and it was the vision of the committee, that STARS and a new awareness of safety would sweep the industry because it is bigger than PLANET; it's bigger than one association.

**Now that STARS has attracted the participation of more than a thousand landscape companies, and many more joining the list annually, how do you view the industry's efforts in improving its safety record?**

More landscape companies than ever, companies big and small, are paying more attention to safety now. But there's all kinds of room for improvement. As far as I know our industry is still one of the seven riskiest industries for accidents. We're thousands of companies on wheels, driving in traffic, pulling trailers and transporting payloads that are heavy and subject to shifting. We operate all kinds of machines where the potential for injury is great whether it's a skid steer, a chain saw or a mower. We still have lots of room to improve.


 Signs at the front gate of Dennis Seven Dees Landscaping remind anybody entering the grounds to focus on safety.

**Are you disappointed in the industry's progress in regards to safety?**

No, we're much more aware of safety now than we were before. But it takes time to develop a culture of safety within companies. And it may be more difficult for smaller companies where the owner has to wear so many hats in running their businesses. They're doing production, selling and just about everything else. But if an owner gives it time, energy and effort, that culture of safety will develop, strengthen and take on a life of its own. Safety has to start from the top with owners. They have to understand how important it is to their companies. Once the people within a company believe that the owner is committed to their safety, they will respond and work safer. What they believe in terms of safety will play out in their behavior.

**Obviously, nobody wants to see anybody killed or injured on the job; that's the overwhelming reason for instilling a culture of safety within a company. But, what are the financial ramifications allied with running a safer company?**

One reason our industry started to pay attention to safety is because insurance companies started paying closer attention to loss ratios. They began to raise premiums and deny coverage. That can have a big impact on running any business. Obviously, I want to manage the risk in my company for business reasons, too. I want to be in a desirable position with a low loss ratio. That gives me negotiating room. When you're talking to your underwriter and they can see that you're serious about safety and participating in STARS, it's only going to help you. Also, the impact on morale within a company is huge. If you, as an employee, feel that the company cares about your safety, really cares, you are going like coming to work.

 A company that shows it cares about its employees' well-being commands better employee buy-in and loyalty.

**What other competitive advantage does a company with a safety culture have in its market?**

Large general contractors do not want to hire companies with a poor safety record. When we do work with a general contractor we have to give them all of our safety measurements, and they give us a safety rating. That qualifies us to work for them. If you show up on a project and have a serious injury or

death on the job, it's devastating to a general contractor.

**Share what you're doing in your company in regards to employee safety.**

I would never say that we've arrived at where we want to be. We still have a lot of work to do. We have a safety committee and have structured it so that we have representatives on it from every department in the company. We limit the chairman's term to two years, so now every department has at least one safety champion that was the chairman at one time. We realize that if we do nothing that we will have accidents and injuries, and it will be costly. We believe that every accident is preventable. We always put safety first on meeting agendas, even if it's just a five-minute discussion with the employees.

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