

Case Study

Van Belle Nursery

Location: Abbotsford, British Columbia

2015 Revenues: \$19.5 million

Employees: 60 fulltime | 80 seasonal

Industry: Nurseries/Garden Center

Highlights



Challenge

One of the biggest challenges that the business faced was finding a way to build a cohesive company culture for its 100 associates, most of whom are immigrants from countries like Mexico, Iraq, Sudan, Zimbabwe, China, Peru, Mexico, and India. Another hurdle is the extreme seasonal nature of the business, where some 75% of all shipments occur over just four weeks in the spring, which places enormous pressure on the nursery to get the right mix of products ready at the right time.



Solution

Give more information to associates and help them make better decisions on the job while also forecasting better for the future.



Results

The business has continued to grow profitably ever since Van Belle began playing the Great Game of Business in 2013. In 2014, they had their most profitable year ever. Then 2015 beat those results – 2016 looks even better.

“The Great Game of Business has brought the company together in a common culture and is helping to create a common language. It reduces barriers when people are working towards the same goal.”



VAN BELLE
WHOLESALE NURSERY
& PROPAGATION

Van Belle Nursery is a commercial supplier of trees, plants, and shrubs. The company, which was founded in 1973, ships to box store retailers in western Canada as well as growers all through the U.S. and Canada.

Company Background

While Dave Van Belle literally grew up working in the business his parents started, he never intended to run it. “I didn’t want to do what my dad did,” he says. But, when his dad offered him a job after college back in 1995, Van Belle couldn’t say no. He took over as president in 2007 and, in 2011, bought out his parents and sister to become the firm’s sole owner.

“My worldview and my experiences led me to conclude that trusting people to run the company was much better than me trying to do it alone. And, it’s much more fun.”

Playing the Game Together

Van Belle has long been interested in implementing best practices into the business, including lean manufacturing principles and Verne Harnish's Gazelle concepts. He also believes in sharing information with his associates and finding ways to help them overcome hurdles in their jobs. "I strongly believe in investing in people," he says.

While his managers held quarterly meetings that helped produce a one-page plan with the firm's quarterly goals, it wasn't until he embraced the Great Game of Business that Van Belle says he found a way to get all of his associates, including those with little or no English skills, on the same page.

"We have had to go above and beyond in delivering intentional teaching," says Van Belle. "Many of our associates are shy about asking questions in a big group, so we also try to break out into smaller groups so they get a chance to speak up."

All associates now attend a daily huddle, which is conducted in both English and Spanish, as well as weekly forecasting meetings. To help everyone keep up to speed, scoreboards have also been put up at the four different farm sites the nursery operates – all of which has helped drive significant cost savings throughout the company.

"The difference that the Great Game of Business has made is that it brings everyone into the full picture. Everyone knows what we are making, and most have an idea of what can be done to improve the financial picture."

Rapid Financial Results; Lasting Cultural Change

One of the changes that GGOB helped bring about in the nursery is that everyone has an incentive to increase profit, whether through increased sales, or through cost savings, everyone can participate. For example, controlling inventory, which is one of the biggest issues a nursery has. "We've created an incentive to not over order or increase inventory," says Van Belle, "which has boosted our overall profitability." The team is also working on their forecasting skills, especially related to cash flow.

Next up for Van Belle is to get more front line associates, involved in their High Involvement Planning budget process. He's particularly interested in generating ideas about how the nursery can diversify and begin to generate revenue beyond its peak season in the spring. Ideas currently on the table include everything from aquaponic growing to licensing their sophisticated in-house inventory and ordering software to other nurseries.

"I know I can't come up with all the ideas on my own," says Van Belle, who wants every one of his team members to think and act like an owner in the business. "But if my associates come up with them, they will own those ideas and run with them. I don't want to be a one-man band. I want to build a company that will outlast me."

"The more we do this, the more we realize that we have so long to go! The journey is long and difficult, but also very rewarding."
