

Case Study

Willoway Nurseries

Location: Avon, Ohio

2015 Revenues: \$32.4 million

Employees: 375

Industry: Nursery/Garden Center

Highlights



Challenge

The landscape supply business is extremely seasonal: Willoway receives 70% of its revenues in the 12-week spring season. That puts enormous pressure to deliver product on time to its customers and to keep costs under control for the remainder of the year when it experiences negative cash flow. Adding to the challenge is that the company employs some 225 Spanish-speaking migrant workers through the H-2A Visa program each year.



Solution

After learning about the Great Game from fellow nursery owner Dave Van Belle of Van Belle Nurseries in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Tom Demaline, Willoway's president, decided they needed to jump all-in as well. The company began their preparation in November 2014 and rolled out the entire system to its full-time staff of 150 employees in February 2015. They then gave their frontline workers, who work in three different locations, an overview of the company's financials as well.



Results

Communications have improved significantly and each department is working together as a team toward achieving their shared goals – something that has helped reduce overtime expenditures and keep labor costs under budget. More recently, thanks to the GGGB, the company was in a financial position to buy a third landscape distribution center in the Cleveland area. That nearly doubled the size of Willoway's distribution center business, which is now called Premier Plant Solutions, to \$8 million in top line sales and a 34% gross margin – which exceeds industry standards.

“When employees don’t know the facts, they think the owners are taking all the money to the bank. They don’t have reason to believe differently. The Great Game gives them the facts.”



Willoway Nurseries is a wholesale grower of trees, shrubs, perennials and seasonal color crops that ships to retailers and contractors in 26 states – making Willoway the largest wholesale grower of nursery products in Ohio and a leading supplier in the United States. The company was searching for a way to operate leaner and to get its workforce, employees in the field and in the back-office, on the same page.

Company Background

Founded by Les and Marilyn Demaline in 1954, the second generation oversees current operations. The third generation has also taken an interest in the business with granddaughter, Emily Showalter, who oversees the HR department and grandson, Eric Demaline, who is a foreman in operations. During the past 61 years, the company has transitioned from landscaping to a wholesale nursery growing more than 2,000 varieties of plant material on its 1,000 acres. Willoway is currently the largest wholesale grower of nursery products in Ohio, with a customer base of more than 1,200 independent garden centers and landscape contractors in the Midwest and east coast.

“Having everyone involved with the numbers and understanding the ‘why’ has improved efficiencies and helped to reduce operating costs.”

Playing the Game Together

One obvious challenge Willoway faced in playing the Great Game was figuring out how to coordinate huddles among its 375 employees between three locations that are 130 miles apart. This was accomplished by the use of technology. In the winter of 2015 they installed communication equipment in their conference room and a 65-inch TV with webcam and remote speakers in the offsite locations. Using WebEx communications they can now have interactive communications with the entire team. Another challenge was the fact that many of the guest workers who arrive each season had a limited education and English speaking skills. To help make sure everyone is involved and understands the full team huddles, Demaline and staff translator tag team the weekly message in both English and Spanish.

But the company decided not to lower its expectations for anyone and, after first running through a financial literacy program with its full-time employees, Demaline began a series of briefings this February for the seasonal workers that were translated into Spanish. "I went through the financials and explained how income and cash minus expenses equaled profits before taxes, or PBT, which was our critical number," says Demaline. "When I explained that 35% of the money we took in went to taxes, they were all like, 'Really?'"

"I think they are shocked at the numbers and that we are teaching them how they can affect every line on the scorecard," says Showalter. "At first they were shy. But now they are opening up and asking questions. They understand the numbers. That helps bring everyone together."

"The scoreboards and huddles brings everything together and makes every single person understand that what they do helps that bonus pool."

Rapid Financial Results; Lasting Cultural Change

With the implementation of daily leadership and department huddles, as well as a weekly "All Team" huddle, communications at Willoway have significantly improved. Recognition for achievements and MiniGames has developed excitement in the work place. Having everyone involved with the numbers and understanding the "why" has improved efficiencies and helped to reduce operating costs. The company is also receiving suggestions on how to improve operations and reduce costs from people at every level of the business. "The phrase 'PBT' or profit-before-tax is used on a regular basis by the people that can affect the changes," says Demaline. "The GGOB has become a way of doing business at Willoway."

"Because of the Great Game we have seen a lot of positive changes in attitude. People are excited and happy to come to work. People now tell us they love working here."