

Case Study

Willoway Nurseries

Location: Avon, OH

2016 Revenues: \$30.4 million

Employees: 375

Highlights

Rapid Financial Results; Lasting Cultural Change

Working outside in the dirt, heat, and rain can be challenging – which can make it difficult to attract and retain quality employees. But in the three years that Willoway has been playing the Great Game of Business, they have seen positive financial results as well as an added vibrancy in their company culture.

“It’s changed the entire experience of working here,” says Tom Demaline, whose parents started the business. “It used to be an OK place to work. Now it’s a great place to work, because we have an atmosphere filled with teamwork and collaboration.”

Nowhere is that more evident than at the company’s various team, departmental, and company-wide huddles – which total some 30 to 40 meetings each week. For example, every Friday the company’s eight different locations tune in for a half hour to talk about their latest wins and to review their financial forecasts.

“It used to be that whenever we held a meeting, there was just silence,” says Emily Showalter, a granddaughter of the founders who also runs human resources at Willoway. “Tom would talk and that was it. Now you walk into one of our huddles and they are fast-paced, energetic, and forward-thinking. There is so much energy where everyone is talking to each other about the business. Our people now feel open to voice their ideas and opinions, and communication has improved significantly company-wide.”



Organizational Background

Founded in 1954, Willoway Nurseries is a wholesale grower of trees, shrubs, perennials, and seasonal color crops that ships to retailer and contractors in 26 states. Willoway is now the largest wholesale grower of nursery products in Ohio and a leading supplier in the United States, with a customer base of more than 1,200 independent garden centers and landscape contractors in the Midwest and East Coast.

“The Great Game of Business has changed the culture at Willoway dramatically. I see more teamwork and see us drawing together to come up with ideas. And I feel like I am listened to.”

~ Pam Novak, Sales Manager

Playing the Game Together

Not only does the Willoway team have to overcome the challenge of tying its people together across multiple locations, it also needs to communicate in multiple languages, since they employ some 225 Spanish-speaking migrant workers through the H-2A Visa program each year.

While the team relies on a translator to help communicate during huddles and financial literacy training, it was creating a culture committee made up of six culture teams throughout the company that has been especially effective at bringing the entire workforce together.

“They have become the voice of the employees,” says Demaline. “We ask them what they think about things as a way to get feedback and to communicate more widely with their peers.”

One example of a change the culture committee helped bring about involved giving up a free breakfast the team won as a result of a successful MiniGame. Rather than spend it on the free food, the workers at Willoway wanted that money donated to a non-profit in the community instead. That’s led to more and more community involvement.

Showalter also says that some of the members of the committee used to be considered naysayers or doubters. Now, by getting them engaged in changing the business, “we have been able to sway them into becoming believers,” she says.

“What I like about the Great Game of Business is how it enhances the communication between our departments.”

~ John Terhesh, Head Grower

What’s Next?

One of the top priorities for Willoway’s leadership team is further improving upon their customers’ satisfaction – which they are tackling through score-boarding and running MiniGames to help better track results.

“We’ve also shifted from a message of selling plants to our customers to selling our culture as our differentiator in the marketplace,” says Demaline. “We can sell the fact that we have 400 people who care about giving our customers great plants.”

The leadership team is also developing a succession plan as a way to help recruit and retain younger workers, by creating a path for them to become leaders and eventually owners in the business.

“The Millennials want to understand why they need to do something, have a voice in the outcome, and feel appreciated,” says Demaline. “And the Great Game of Business brings all of that. I feel adamantly that if you want to survive in business in the Twenty First century you have to run a business this way.”

“The Great Game of Business means that I have a voice where my thoughts and ideas are listened to as we move forward as a company.”

~ Leigh Stumm, Inside Sales
