

Core values set the course for HIRING and TEAM BUILDING

Two contractors share how focusing on employees turned their companies around.

David Chenoweth, Western States Reclamation, Frederick, and Tom Sunderland, Native Edge Landscapes, Boulder both say that drastic shifts in their management and hiring practices after being in business a dozen or so years turned their companies and even their personal lives around. According to Sunderland, “The grumps are gone.” Adds Chenoweth, “Turnover has reduced significantly.”

Both had pivotal moments when they knew something had to change. They couldn’t keep up with business as usual as it wasn’t productive or conducive to growth. As Chenoweth puts it, “You finally get yourself beat up so bad, you have to make a commitment to do it right—or you know you’re going to fail.”

Both owners found (and continue to find) inspiration in management books and from other company leaders they respect. Both also had the epiphany that they had to rebuild from the basics—the core values that would define their company culture, expectations of employees and the quality of service their customers get. Their next challenge was to find the right people who sincerely share these values and would live them in their work.

Western States Reclamation, Inc., was started by Chenoweth as a one-crew operation in 1983 and is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. The company provides reclamation, storm water management, landscaping and habitat construction services throughout the western United States. Their work often takes them to challenging sites in remote locations.

By Becky Garger

Below: Some of his team at Native Edge Landscapes

Photo courtesy Native Edge Landscapes





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WSRI's core values are prominent on the home page of their website: exceeding client expectations, offering employees opportunities to advance and a separate mission statement devoted to safety. Finding people who truly embrace these values became Chenoweth's personal mission.

About 15 years into the business, Chenoweth saw he was spending \$5,000 or more to advertise for, hire and train each key employee and within a year, most employees weren't where they needed to be. He was frustrated that "we were more focused on employee issues than getting the job done."

He set out to clarify expectations in line with core values in the company handbook, which spells out policies for up to 200 employees in peak season. It takes core values to the practical level, like making clear the serious penalties for vicious in-house gossip. "Solid policies and procedures—with progressive training—are the key to avoiding lost time and costly mistakes. It took me years to learn this," he says. Now, poor performers typically leave if they cannot handle the level of performance and workmanship that's expected.

Promoting core company values must happen every day. Absolute quality is both a work in progress and a daily event.

Several years ago, a peer in the construction industry told Chenoweth how he used a psychologist to do pre-employment personality profiles and screen candidates for top positions—project managers, estimators, office managers, etc. This process is a pricey \$2,000 per candidate, but it has also weeded out felons and embezzlers who were high on the candidate list.

Chenoweth had his own profile done and learned "if I slowed down, I could focus as much on my employees as the customer." He knew how to give good customer service, but often neglected employee needs in the process. He admits that in the early years, he was a poor manager. "I'd rush in to fix a problem and step on a lot of toes in the process." Now he uses the "walk about" management principle. "While it is hard for me at times to get to the field, when I do, I learn a lot." He starts with the lowest level employee and asks how things are going and what needs to be fixed. He goes through the ranks asking the same questions and ultimately shares what he learns with project managers and superintendents.

Building good team relationships also involves opening up the financial details. "An important thing I learned is to share financial information in varying degrees with varying levels of employees." The good employees strive to make sure the company is profitable, because they, too, benefit. Says Chenoweth, "We now have a hard core team in place and the peer pressure is intense. When new hires come on board, they work hard to get them up to speed—FAST."

Promoting core company values must happen every day. "Absolute quality is both a work in progress and a daily event," Chenoweth says. And it's the same for safety, which due to the nature of their work, requires a thorough safety site analysis each and every day. He says, "If as a team, you don't make your values a daily event, it won't happen."

Native Edge Landscapes: It's about the people

Tom Sunderland's Boulder-based Native Edge Landscapes has been in business since 2001. The firm provides full-service landscape services from design/build to ongoing maintenance. Like WSRI, its core values are front and center on the home page as "the values we work and play by."

Work isn't necessarily playtime—but Sunderland says, "If you can't enjoy yourself, go out and find another job!" After he and key team members did the hard work a few years ago to ferret out their core company values, the culture changed. "People out there are happier and working faster," he says.

For Sunderland, the company is more about the people than the landscape or maybe even the customer. For example, he schedules appointments around the continental breakfast and staff meeting that he personally sets up in the back yard for 35 employees every Tuesday.

It's a quick meeting when a lot happens. People with birthdays are recognized, there's a raffle for a \$10 gift card and a safety reminder. The team also shares their company "scorecards" when good work, customer kudos and employees are recognized for saving a project and turning a customer around. For Sunderland, the business is now all about his team and creating opportunities for all of them to grow.

Getting to this point began with Sunderland's business epiphany about five years ago, when the economy tanked. He was desperately trying to hold onto his best people when they came to him and said they were all looking to leave. Some, in fact, were already interviewing. "That's



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when I started to think about the philosophy of how businesses are managed. I knew I couldn't keep running the business with the same old management style," he says.

His major realization, he recalls, was that "if everyone at every level does not have a place to move up continually, they will all be short-term players. You need people who have goals. If you do the same thing year after year, you will burn people out, and they'll want to do something else."

Books inspire him, like *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins, who, he learned, was a customer,

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Working at Native Edge is about more than drawing a paycheck.

Gino Wickman's *Traction* and *FiSH*. "None of what I did was invented from scratch," he says. "Pieces of this are being done in other places, and there are lots of resources."

Sunderland is now committed to having a very visible ladder within the company which people know they can climb. The first rung is embracing and following the core values. Next is the core focus of the team and finally, a 10-year target of where they plan to be. "If we're going to have a 10-year vision, then I want to surround myself with people who will be here in 10 years," he says.

Sunderland also promotes a value that isn't on the home page, namely, humility. "When we hire new managers with info up front about our values, we also tell them that their job as a manager is to grow their people." Sunderland wants his managers to mentor and coach. He tells them, "Your people will come in with all kinds of problems, so make a difference in their lives." Working at Native Edge is about more than drawing a paycheck. It's a people business, and the ones who fit in best get it.

"Some of us get to the point where growing people is more gratifying than growing a plant. Through the company, we offer an opportunity for a structured, safe environment to be successful," he says.

Sunderland is pleased with this renewed vision and way of operating his business. "For the first time we have a pretty amazing team. I've had to change and be more committed to doing these things. I've had to become more disciplined than I used to be," he says.

Sunderland often uses a favorite quote from Plato--because of the obvious industry tie-in: "People are like dirt. They can either nourish you and help you grow as a person--or they can stunt your growth and make you wilt and die." Finding that nourishment from books and other people keeps Sunderland moving ahead with his vision. "They challenge me if I slack off," he says. 🍃