

The Numbers Game

CleanScapes

The Story | At CleanScapes, a Seattle-based waste reduction, diversion and collection service company, it's all about the numbers. Inc. magazine recently named CleanScapes one of the top 5,000 quickest growing companies in the U.S., and the fourth fastest growing environmental firm. The company wants to break into the top 500 next year.

Engagement Strategies | Internally, the company keeps close tabs on important metrics known as “CleanStats,” which are shared with the whole company in a weekly meeting and include operational efficiencies, errors, kudos, and the like. The metrics have been instrumental in helping the firm meet and beat its internal financial performance goals, says Human Resources Manager Bonnie Abbott.

Daily morning huddles by department and dedicated efforts, from top management to entry level employees, have also helped cut missed pickups, accidents and route hours (which drive most of the firm's direct costs including labor, fuel use, and maintenance expenses) down to acceptable and budgeted levels.

While the numbers game helps the firm perform financially, the triple bottom line organization has other broader commitments, too. CleanScapes spearheaded pioneering environmental and civic strategies to clean up and strengthen urban neighborhoods and found innovative ways to reduce the environmental footprint of their clients while saving them money.

The company has partnered with a transitional jobs program to train people “without great job opportunities to come work for our firm,” says CEO Chris Martin. Individuals who might be overlooked at other entry level jobs have found well paying opportunities in the company's construction recycling division and neighborhood beautification team (including graffiti removal and street washing).

Growing steadily since its founding in 1997, the firm now employs 260 individuals, many of whom are entry level and benefit from the opportunity to develop a successful career path. “We have one manager that started with us as an \$8.00 per hour cleaning staff member five years ago,” explains Martin. “He now runs operations for our San Francisco office and is a tremendous asset to the company.”

If numbers are a key driver, so is the company’s outstanding culture. Strategies that preserve and enhance the culture include safety and inspirational message displays that boast kudos from customers and the monthly employee peer-to-peer recognition winners. All employees go by first name, promotion from within is common and checks have been passed out personally as an opportunity to thank employees (although recently more employees have signed up for direct deposit – an important step in improving personal financial management skills). The company also contributes 75% to employees’ health and dental insurance and offers an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). In addition, CleanScapes will soon begin awarding bonuses based on achieving metrics, according to Abbott.

CleanScapes is devoted to cleanliness and cultivating pride in personal and equipment appearance – part of what Abbott describes as their commitment to “becoming the best in the business and about more than just picking up



AT A GLANCE CLEANSCAPES

Business:

Waste reduction, diversion and collection services

Location:

Seattle, Washington

Revenues:

\$50 million in 2009

Employees:

263

Engagement:

- open book management
- generous benefits
- promotion from within
- clearly communicated success metrics
- teams and huddles
- company-wide meetings and celebrations

Business result:

- low employee turnover
- high customer satisfaction and retention

the trash.” She described a recent incident in which a CleanScapes driver helped a customer gather up yard waste so he wouldn’t miss the pickup. “He sent us a letter saying how blown away he was that our employees weren’t put out that he wasn’t prepared,” she said.

There is friendly competition between teams to reduce trash can misses, errors, injuries and other targets. Abbott says the goals frequently rotate, with teams consistently raising the bar for their peers. Employees’ good performance is rewarded with a punch card that, when filled, earns them a stainless steel water bottle with the company logo.

Clear, consistent and open communication is a company hallmark. Drivers join management once a month for lunch to offer feedback and suggestions for improving operations. This communication has paid off in efficiency gains. For example, two employees devised a way to improve truck performance that doubled productivity and cut trip mileage in half. Less wear and tear on city streets and a far lighter carbon footprint proved to be such attractive benefits from the innovation that the company similarly outfitted all of their trucks.

“In all companies, employees are an asset – but particularly in ours,” says Martin. “We’ve got over 100 trucks on the road every day and it’s very important that those trucks are driven by people with high morale and a high respect for safety and the community.”

Business Results | CleanScapes’ laser focus on the numbers has earned the company bonuses from the city of Seattle, a major customer. CFO Chris Husband says the company’s rapid growth and high customer satisfaction are largely due to its team of engaged employees. “The folks in the field are the key,” he says. “Their hard work and positive attitude has enabled our success to date and will determine our success in the future.”

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Clearly communicated success metrics combined with team rallies, strong benefits, and implementation of employee ideas for process improvement can lead to fast growth, low accident rates, and meaningful environmental and social impacts.**
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