



The McQuaig Institute®

Sheridan Nurseries Plants the Seeds for a Prosperous Future



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As Sheridan Nurseries approaches its 100th anniversary you would think that the Stensson family would be able to kick back and smell the roses. But with a severe shortage of skilled labour, big box stores moving onto their turf and global warming making the weather less predictable than ever, they are relying on the power of their people to continue to thrive. In the last ten years, Sheridan Nurseries has doubled in size. Here is how The McQuaig Institute® has been a valued partner during that time, helping Sheridan understand and harness the people side of their business to drive growth.

Sven Herman Stensson immigrated to Canada in 1913 with an impressive looking resume, including a stint as the chief gardener for the Crown Prince of Denmark at Knuthenborg Castle. He became the first nursery manager of a new nursery, in the town of Sheridan, just west of Toronto.

Close to one hundred years later, Sheridan Nurseries continues to be the leader in the industry, with three of Herman's grandchildren (Bill, Karen, and Karl) actively involved in the business. Herman would be proud of the nursery operation which is now 900 acres in size and grows more than three million plants per year. The company continues to grow despite challenges on all fronts - from the labour market, the big box stores, the high price of land and of course, the unpredictable weather.

Battling the Skills Shortage



Karl Stensson

Like many industries, businesses in the horticultural sector suffer from a shortage of skilled labour. “Our industry needs 15-20,000

people annually” says Karl Stensson, who in addition to holding the position of Senior Vice President at Sheridan Nurseries is an Honorary Life Member of The Landscape Ontario Trades Association. “The horticulture schools are only producing 2,500 a year, so we hire for attitude and teach skills by necessity - not by choice.”

Attracting and retaining talent starts with making sure that all hires are a good fit for the job and for the company. Sheridan has been using The McQuaig System™ since 1999 when President, Bill Stensson was introduced to the behavioural assessment system at an executive forum. “Establishing the right fit is critical and McQuaig has been very helpful in that regard,” says Bill Stensson. “We need someone whose values and motivations are aligned with ours or success will be an uphill battle.”

In addition to making sure that candidates have the right stuff, McQuaig also helps smooth interpersonal dynamics within the retail operations. “Anticipating the relationship between an assistant store manager and a store manager is critical,” says Erica Lowartz-Cozzarin, who is in charge of train-

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ing and recruiting for the nine garden centres. “These people will be working closely together for up to sixty hours each week in the spring, so any personality differences they have will be magnified.

“You don’t want to place an independent assistant manager with a store manager who has a tendency to micro-manage. McQuaig’s Do’s & Don’ts (Strategies for Coaching and Developing) report is very helpful. We have had luck with managers who have a Specialist profile in some stores. They have been good enablers for high potential assistant managers who have gone on to run their own stores.”

The Big Box Threat

While Sheridan Nurseries remains the largest independent nursery in the Greater Toronto Area and one of the top fifteen in North America, the retail operations are under siege from big box stores like Wal-Mart and Home Depot. “The land values are just too high to run a garden centre since most stores require a minimum of three acres. Many second and third generation owners are just closing up shop and selling the land.” says Karl Stensson. “So we turned the big box stores from our competitors into our customers. To survive these days, you need a strong wholesale business.”

Bill Stensson is also upbeat on the big box threat. “The Wal-Marts and Home Depots have made the pie bigger. Someone is looking for a shovel, takes the wrong aisle and ends up in the plant section. They become a customer and, if it becomes a hobby, they will soon want greater variety and expertise – that’s when they come to Sheridan.”

Another area the company is looking to grow is in business-to-business sales, selling landscape services and products to corporate offices and restaurants. The McQuaig Job Survey® has been helpful in helping the senior team reach consensus on the ideal profile of a B2B salesperson. “If the senior team is in disagreement on the job demands the candidate has failed before they’ve even started,” says Karl Stensson “and McQuaig makes it clear when we are not on the same page.”

A Living Product

How might the role of store manager at Sheridan Nurseries be different than the store manager of any other retail operation, a Canadian Tire or Midas Muffler, and how does this impact the recruiting process?



“The biggest difference that I see is that at Sheridan Nurseries, we are selling a living product” says Jim MacLeod, the Human Resources Manager. “We are very crop driven. When you make a decision that starts with putting a cutting in the ground and ends with putting a plant into a shopping cart months or years later you need to pay attention to data and trends.

“As a result, many of our managers have what McQuaig calls the Pioneer profile. They score high on Dominance and Drive which is important in a results oriented-company like ours. But they are also analytical and pay great attention to detail as you need to in a business like ours. Managers in retail and operations are inundated with a wide variety of reports that can impact the business.”

Moving Forward

What might the future hold for Sheridan Nurseries? Climate change, bringing a combination of increased rainfall and warmer temperatures leads to different plants thriving in different climate zones. The company will need to be more flexible and even more data-driven as they try to predict future trends.

With a firm grasp on both the data and the people side of the business, Sheridan Nurseries is well-positioned to face whatever Mother Nature can throw their way.

When asked about the challenges of succession planning in a family run business Karl laughs, “they say it is the third generation that usually messes up family run businesses and we have survived that.” With McQuaig lending a helping hand in the recognition and development of future talent Sheridan Nurseries is planting the seeds for a prosperous future. ■