BASIC INSTRUCTION FOR THE TREE CARE TRAINEE[1]

by Robert Felix

Basic instruction for the tree care trainee begins long before the trainee becomes an employee. It begins with the image portrayed by the employer that attracts the potential employee in the first place. The wording of a classified advertisement or the image that an employment agency conveys, will determine whether or not an individual will fill out an application for employment. In our industry, new employees are often recruited by existing employees. If there is nothing to see, low wages, poor working conditions, a negative atmosphere, there will be no results.

A prospective employee is attracted by wages, but also by other considerations. Some of these may be cosmetic but they are a reflection of the management. Such considerations include good looking equipment, professional looking employees, and a respectable looking working place. More substantial considerations include future opportunities, fringe benefits, and the attraction of learning a trade.

Many people don't realize that an interview is a two-way street. Both parties are interviewing, and it is at this point that basic instruction for the tree care trainee really begins. The prospective employee's first impressions of an employer last forever. An interview conducted in a very positive way can save grief later. If the association begins on a negative basis, it will be difficult to turn around later.

The prospective employee first wants to know the job description. What will he or she be doing? At this time a picture is worth a thousand words and the National Arborist Association (NAA) has developed a slide/cassette program to provide just this. The questions that are going through the mind of the employee are these.

1) What is starting and quitting time?
2) Who is in charge?
3) What is the standard uniform?
4) Is there overtime? Do you work on Saturday?
5) What happens if the weather is bad? Is there shop time or is there an opportunity to make up the time?
6) What about sick time, vacations, holidays?
7) Is there life insurance, Blue Cross, major medical, or a pension?
8) What are the opportunities for the future?
9) Is there a written company policy?

Probably the single most important question is: When can I get a raise? The employer should anticipate all of these and specifically outline what a trainee must do to be advanced in rank as well as financially.

Some companies have developed complete company policies. These written policies are reviewed during the interview and when employment begins, the employee signs a statement acknowledging the fact that they have been received, understood, and are acceptable. This is an excellent technique for establishing good employee relations. Also, if it becomes necessary, it is an excellent means for validating that the employee has been terminated for violating company policy. It also helps with unemployment claims and with OSHA if there is a termination resulting from safety violations.

After a mutual understanding is reached, basic instruction in tree care techniques begins. There is no substitute for field training. It may be supplemented by educational programs but in-service training is the only way that a trainee learns to be an arborist. This is emphasized in the NAA audio visual program on basic instruction for the tree care trainee as follows:

In the processing of learning to be a qualified arborist, most new employees receive their basic instruction as helpers, assisting trained personnel, learning techniques, and studying fundamental manuals. In some states and in some phases of tree care, such as utility tree trimming, this is required for a minimum of one year.

---

[1]Presented at the annual convention of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario in August 1978.

An arborist is a professional tree care specialist trained and experienced in all phases of arboriculture including trimming, spraying, tree removal, feeding, watering, transplanting, cabling and bracing, surgery practices, and diagnosis. A trainee learns by being a helper to this professional who is known as an arborist.

As an employee, the trainee must remember that he or she is a representative of the employing company, municipality or institution. It must be understood that the employee's appearance, attention to clients, and work habits are always a reflection on the employer and not the individual. It is the company's name that the customer is conscious of. Therefore, it is imperative that the trainee be familiar with what is expected by the employer.

In most instances a trainee's first responsibilities are either as a helper in a spray crew dragging hose, dragging brush on a tree trimming job, or on the end of a shovel in a landscape crew. The purpose here is to orient the trainee of the major tree care functions while at the same time providing a safe place to work with readily understandable responsibilities.

A helper in a spray crew assists the foreman in many ways, such as providing directions while the truck is being backed into position. He unloads the spray hose and lays it out so that the foreman is ready to start spraying immediately after he notifies the customer that the crew is on the property. He starts the pump, and handles the spray hose so that the foreman can spray efficiently with no hose-pulling on his part, while at the same time guiding the hose so that it doesn't inadvertently damage plants. The trainee might also be required to move patio furniture or other vulnerable items such as bird baths to prevent spray staining or pollution. While the foreman is completing his work sheet for the job, the helper loads the hose, restores bird baths, patio furniture, and other items to their original position, and keeps the truck windows and lights free from accumulations of spray drift.

During this process, the trainee learns about the various insects and diseases that the crew is spraying to prevent or control, and also about the pesticides that are used in this process and how to handle them safely. Always remember to stop and read the label before using any pesticides. The trainee also learns to identify trees and shrubs during the spray operation by having the foreman point them out.

The trainee that is initially assigned to a trimming crew has different basic assignments. Loading and unloading tools sounds like a simple enough task, but the familiarization that it develops helps the trainee to understand why and how tools are stored on a trimming truck and provides some insight into the purposes of the various tools. During the course of the work operation, the trainee is able to observe tree climbers in action, watching the climbing process, as well as the act of pruning, removing trees, or performing other tree maintenance practices such as removing a girdling root.

Sometimes in addition to a lowering line, a pull or tag line is required to guide a limb away from a hazard or to prevent the limb from becoming tangled. It is good practice to wrap the lowering line around a tree trunk to provide braking action for the rope. Never wrap a rope around your hands or body. Snaking the rope in short spurts allows a heavy limb to be lowered slowly with a minimum of shock force to the rope.

Much of the time the trainee will be relegated to handling brush. This is always a hard-hat job and one must always stay clear of falling limbs. If the brush is to be hand loaded on a truck, the load is always started over the rear wheels. The leaf or bud ends point to the back of the truck with care being taken not to cover stop lights or directional signals. The butt end of the limbs always point towards the cab of the truck. This arrangement makes dumping the load easier since both the bulk and the weight are in the back.

Most tree care operations are blessed with chippers which can take large limbs and convert them to wood chips. Limbs are brought from the area of trimming to the chipper and stacked either behind or adjacent to it, but never blocking the sidewalk. The butt ends always face the chipper table as this is the end that is fed in first. Feeding a chipper is a job that requires eye protection, and if you will be working alongside an operating chipper for any length of time, ear protection is required as

well.

Frequently a helper is required to tie tools onto a lowering line for a climber to use once he is up in a tree. Chainsaws, weighing over 10 pounds, should always be suspended from an independent safety line while being used in a tree and the rope placed in a different crotch from the climber's safety line.

If the chainsaw runs out of gas while the climber is in the air, he will lower it to the trainee to be filled. Always be sure that a chainsaw is filled with properly mixed chainsaw gas. Allow the saw to cool off before filling. A spill could cause a fire. Always fill a chainsaw on pavement, plywood, or on undeveloped soil area. Gasoline kills grass and flowers.

When work is being done near a public thoroughfare, it may be necessary to control motor vehicle or pedestrian traffic. This is a function of the helper. Every job should be left in a neat, clean condition. A thorough raking of the work area is mandatory. Although a trainee is expected to learn by observation and performing simple tasks, the trainee is also expected to fulfill each of the assigned tasks.

The NAA home study program provides excellent background. Every trainee should take the program. It gives the trainee a better understanding of that which the trainee is learning and field learning speed is increased.

The NAA slide/cassette programs are designed to supplement field training and to provide orientation as well. If, for example, a trainee were going to learn how to install cables, showing the slide/cassette program before going into the field would give familiarization of terminology, tools, and techniques. This expedites the training process. The slide/cassette programs are also used as a refresher course for experienced employees. When weather conditions preclude field operations, training sessions can be held for all employees. Often discussions are stimulated that provide additional training even for those with many years in the field.

A student is a product of the teacher. If a trainee gets field experience with a good foreman, the training will be good. Keep in mind that not all good foremen are good teachers. Also consider that each foreman's background is different. A trainee may need to spend time with several foremen to get a good training. Trainees learn bad habits as well as good ones. Employers tend to tolerate the bad habits of established employees because their good qualities more than offset the bad. Be sure that the trainee doesn't become the victim of these situations. A good interview, followed by field experience, supplemented by available educational programs are the integral parts of the basic instruction for a tree care trainee.

Executive Secretary
National Arborist Association
Wantagh, New York

ABSTRACT

Smith, E.M. 1978. **Species, soil, location affect tree fertilization.** Weeds, Trees & Turf 17(10): 16-17, 20.

Many facturs influence how much fertilizer shade trees need, such as species response, soil variation, and location. Recognizing differences in these factors will lead to proper fertilization and to improved performance of the trees. It is important to realize that certain trees, particularly when grown out of their native habitat, may have specific nutritional needs. Recognizing that soils in landscape sites are often subsoil or a subsoil mixture often heavily compacted from construction equipment and typically poorly drained create a whole new set of challenges for the tree care firm. The location of a tree in the landscape may influence its fertilizer practices. A shade tree in the backyard, typically without stress conditions, usually will require less fertilizer and fewer applications than a tree planted between the sidewalk and street.