

# THE PEOPLE SIDE OF TIMBER HARVESTING

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## ABSTRACT

The common belief is “your people are your most important asset”, but when it comes to safety and moving the wood in a timely fashion, “the people who *lead* your people are your most important asset.”

More times than not, thoughts and philosophies behind strategies in motivation, and employee engagement fall by the wayside once a harvesting crew enters the woods. The forest supply chain is not only made up of products, but living breathing human beings who spend a better part of their lives in the woods. These professionals are NOT immune to the principles of human nature. More attention needs to be paid to that when speaking of strengthening the forest value chain.

Safety in the woods is vital, and all the hardhats and steel toed boots will not save a disengaged employee from the perils of an accident on the job.

A conscious decision needs to be made by owners of timber harvesting companies, to build employee engagement through training. Strengthening crew supervisors in the areas of communication, leadership, team building and motivation will not only improve production, but create a safer work environment.

Leadership training in the corporate world is an everyday consideration to strengthen the bottom line. It is common knowledge that employee engagement will eliminate costly mistakes. In the woods, being on the cutting edge means acquiring new equipment. There needs to be an awareness and understanding that the people side of timber harvesting is equally important as a well planned preventative maintenance schedule.

Loggers live in the urgent, blown hoses, equipment failure, and ever changing quotas. Planning and awareness of the basic psychological principles of motivation will give them a better understanding of every day human relations.

**Keywords:** Employee, engagement, leadership, safety, production

## **THE PEOPLE SIDE OF TIMBER HARVESTING**

This paper is to raise awareness in the forest products industry of the value of strengthening the human side of timber harvesting.

The forest products industry has it down to a science. Certification shows that our industry cares for the indigenous people and the environment, making sure that the wood is as pure as it can be. The industry has been working hard to develop criteria to strengthen the purity of the path the wood takes to its final destination. It seems that most of the focus for improvement is on the product and the path, and not the people who move wood along that path. The strength of our industry lies on the backs of those who cut the wood, the loggers. In order to strengthen the chain where it matters most, more focus should be paid to strengthening the soft skills of management of those who hold up the industry, our loggers. This will strengthen the chain at the beginning, in the woods, right at the stump.

It all starts with a landowner who needs to communicate with a forester, logger or land management company and vice versa. There, in the woods, under a hemlock or maple, as their feet touch the ground and their mouths move to exchange information is where it all begins. The chain begins there, the chain of wood and the chain of communication, one that can be strengthened or weakened. One that can be used as an opportunity for education and relationship building, or relationship weakening, where words are shared and checked for understanding, or not. After speaking with the landowner, the forester or logger needs to communicate the harvest plan to the crew supervisor, and then he or she will convey that information to each crew member and trust that they will work to support the company in a way that strengthens the bottom line.

Every human interaction along the forest products chain is one that can be used for maximum potential, or one that can be treated as a casual means to an end. An awareness of the principles that govern good human relations needs to be interwoven throughout this chain that is so quickly called the forest “products” chain. The care and cultivation of people involved in timber harvesting is as important to the logging industry as the ideas of innovation that improve the technical side of our businesses. I have spent two years working as a training consultant, behind the doors of local, national and international companies, and six years in the logging industry. My unique perspective can only be gained by straddling the “edge”, where corporate employee development meets logging crew development. I’ve had the unique opportunity to have one foot in the woods, and one foot in the boardroom, with regards to employee development, and I work hard to make leadership, communication and teambuilding skills available to those who could benefit most.

Every good business, whether in the corporate world, or not, needs to overcome hurdles when working to develop its people. These businesses deal with budget cuts, schedules, attitudes, and fears. To those who ask “What if I train this person, soak a lot of money into them and they leave?” I say, “What will happen if you don’t, and they stay?”

Businesses are like families, they all have issues. It’s the businesses that opt to deal with those issues that place themselves on the cutting edge. There are all sorts of struggles to overcome in order to train and work with employees to assure that businesses are getting the best return on their investment.

In the woods, the struggles are the same as those faced by traditional business, only magnified by additional stressors. Variables that are beyond a logging contractor's control, such as unpredictable markets, excessive regulation, weather, quotas, fuel prices, breakdowns and attitudes; attitudes exacerbate the already challenging situation. A logger from the state of Washington had this to say about employee engagement on the job.

“Employee comfort is of least most importance unless it is acquired as a freebie as a result of other policy changes. There is no goal setting, or set review period for raises. You are hired into a job title and there you stay at a given rate of pay. Hard work will get you advanced in stature. Whining and griping will get you canned. If you don't agree with these rules, then simply find a different line of work. That, in a nutshell, is the law of the land out here.” He went on to say that usually any initiative would be regarded with suspicion as only a means to an end, benefitting the corporate entity only.

“Meetings, *Scmeetings*, who needs them? Just go into the woods and get the wood out!” was the reaction I got from a logger named David, as I worked to create a regular staff meeting schedule. Regular meetings, goal setting and reviews are the least of what needs to take place in the woods. Later, after he saw the impact the changes had on the crew, David gave me a heartfelt apology. The challenge here is to infuse our logging culture with these skills to receive maximum employee engagement. After all, the new global business reality is more production, faster and with fewer resources.

One of the biggest challenges in Maine's forest product industry is the difficulty we have attracting young people into the logging profession. One of the reasons is the lack of occupational prestige, as noted by Professor Andrew Egan's research project “Business and Employment Stability and Sustainability in the Logging and Forest Products Community of New England and New York” as well as one of the realizations gleaned from the Logger/Trucker Congresses conducted around the state of Maine by the Maine Forest Service and The Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands in 2008. More focus on employee engagement by strengthening leadership skills will strengthen the professionalism of the logging industry. Logging companies need to know that they have these training resources available should they want to access them. (Egan 2007)

Logging, by nature, is for the tough. While working in the woods one day, a crew member cut his hand on a chipper knife, not too serious, but requiring stitches. As he got in my rig to go to the hospital, but had to endure comments like “pull up your skirt” or “wrap it up and get back to work.” So with regards to training, fears are heightened with the mere thought that if a logger exhibits buy in, he could be viewed as a traitor or someone who “needs to pull his skirt up”. So, when analyzing what needs to happen with training, you have to take into account all the customary business struggles as well as the attitudes and traditions from a profession steeped in tradition.

## **TRAINING LEADERS IN THE WOODS TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND PRODUCTION**

There is a whole wealth of value that comes from focusing on employee engagement. The equation I like to use is,  $US + CREW = TEAM$ . In this simple equation, crew leaders learn that creating a sense of team isn't just learning about the crew, but learning about themselves as well. This awareness is part of the secret to creating a strong "TEAM" which is the key to workplace or employee engagement. The true sense of the word is a little ethereal, but extremely valuable nonetheless. A crew supervisor may have great leadership skills but still need to understand how to use those skills to get the most out of his crew. Unlocking a harvesting crew's potential takes a leader who understands the principles behind inspiring their crew members to be the best they can be. It is his or her responsibility to understand that, and make it happen.

All of these principles have to do with the soft skills of management. Without "soft", the drivers of business success will always be less than what they could have been in the areas of leadership, communication, teambuilding, motivation, change management, and improved safety. Yes, analyzing the job, creating the harvest system to move the wood in the most technically sound way, is crucial to production. At the other end of the spectrum, and equally as important, is the emphasis on the human element of that production. To ignore that would be to make logging an even more dangerous profession than it already is.

In the woods safety is vital, and a great safety program is only as good as the employees who live it. Crew supervisors cannot demand safety, but need to inspire it. In response to mentioning his book on management in my blog, I was contacted via e-mail by Rodd Wagner a principle at The Gallup Organization and New York Times bestselling author to say this, "Thank you for your mention of *12: The Elements of Great Managing* in your column on employee motivation. You are absolutely right that companies can't force people to do everything they want them to do. There is a huge range of performance based on the engagement of the employee and the team."

Safety is a combination of tangible and intangible elements. The intangible is centered on the soft skills of management. These intangible elements are like invisible assets woven through the workday, workweek and work lives of all that belong to the crew. In order to understand the impact that these principles have on the work team, crew supervisors must learn that an engaged employee is a safer employee. Wagner went on to tell me, "As you mentioned, the implications of employee engagement for safety are astounding. I've spent some time reviewing OSHA reports on serious accidents. Although there is always some proximate cause of the accident -some failure to follow procedures - the reason behind that failure often appears to be a simple lack of vigilance or mindfulness of others, making engagement just as important as a hard hat or steel-toed boots."

Leaders in the woods are responsible for making the harvest job the safest it can be. Learning how to use the tools of engagement will improve the conditions on the job, and go beyond personal protective equipment.

Across the board, in the logging industry, there needs to be a blanket understanding that leadership skills are important in order to maximize production and safety. Whether a leader is

leading one or ten crew members, if words are exchanged, those words can be handled mindfully to achieve the most benefit, for the leader, the crew and the company.

Crew supervisors generally get promoted for hard work and knowledge of the products and systems. This is the perfect time for training to take place. A logging company's most important asset is the leaders who lead their people. The industry has to create an influx of opportunities for leadership training on this level, before the damage of poor management can be done. Before production and safety are compromised. This is the window of opportunity where the groundwork can be laid for improved leadership skills in order to get the most out of crew members. Dwight Eisenhower once said "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it".

Adding prestige to the profession by boosting the attention to job satisfaction through employee engagement is priceless, whether a crew of two or five, in a company of fifteen or fifty.

## **Us**

When working to understand the power of the employee engagement equation in the woods, US represents owners and supervisors. The role of the supervisor as a leader is just as important as understanding the behavior of the crewmembers. How do they lead? Where do their leadership skills come from? The answer to these questions can lead to an understanding of how to lead more effectively in order to help crew members reach their maximum potential.

The ability to rise above the traditions and attitudes of working in the woods, and objectively view the equation to work it for maximum employee engagement is the secret. Attitudes can be changed, so that a good leader can be admired for his attention to the soft skills of management.

## **Crew**

Leaders need to learn about themselves and how they can improve, but they also need to understand the crew members and why they do what they do. Human nature is always predictable. By analyzing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in relation to crew members, and what motivates individuals, can be an eye opening exercise for managers. Through this, leaders can understand how to meet the needs of the employees on an individual level to help them work through the tiers of motivation, and to know that yes, there are ways to broaden and put emphasis on dragging trees to the landing every day, or processing products to send to the mill. (Maslow 1943)

Understanding the Crew can open new avenues for motivation and strengthened communication. Emphasizing the importance of on the spot coaching, timely reviews with opportunities for improvement, problem solving, goal setting, and genuine recognition, just to name a few.

## **HURDLES**

The science of the biology of leadership is ever evolving, but the principles will remain the same. In an article, Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership, by Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis in the September 2008 issue of Harvard Business Review, they discuss the research in

the emerging field of social neuroscience. In this new trend of study it's revealed exactly what the brain does while people interact. This sheds light on what it takes to make a good leader. (Goleman & Boyatzis 2008) Companies on the cutting edge are taking these things into account when promoting and selecting new leaders. Attitude and people skills are more important in leading than knowledge of business management. Here is where our industry hits a hurdle, logging companies cannot go out to find crew supervisors in the mainstream who have the qualities of a great leader and stick him or her in a crane on the landing. The logging company can benefit at this point by requiring leadership training before the supervisor steps into the new position, this would give an advantage to the manager, the crew and the company.

The fact that logging is in a lot of cases is familial can lead to a separate set of hurdles. When it is a family owned business, the traditions can span generation after generation with no evidence of attention to employee engagement. In larger companies where there is a combination of family as well as regular employees, how do managers, who may be working with relatives, stay focused on the skills they need to get the most out of their people? By making this kind of training available to crew supervisors, they can keep up with trends in leadership and employee engagement that can give them the skills to handle these unique situations.

### **Packaging**

Here is a very crucial part, the soft skills of management need to be roughed up for the delivery. The biggest hurdle is to train employees in the things they have chosen to avoid by going to the woods in the first place. One logger told me "there's NOTHING soft about logging". On the contrary, there has to be soft in logging to strengthen the forest products chain. The soft skills of management will always be perceived as "touchy feely". That is exactly why, in order to get loggers to test the water, we need to label it in a way that focuses on solutions for actual issues on the job. One example, my workshop "How to Build a Kick@#\$ Crew" focuses on strengthening leadership skills in order to improve production. The language of production is understood across all professions. Strengthening the bottom line will catch any logger's attention. Process improvement programs recognize the need for strengthening human relation skills as a key component for their success. There are no two ways around it; you cannot strengthen the process without strengthening the people.

### **Delivery**

Loggers, on the average, will not be receptive to someone who has not worked in the woods and understands their stresses to the fullest extent. Why should they? How can someone offer solutions without a complete understanding of what a work day truly entails? It's impossible to inject a corporate trainer or coach with the knowledge and essence of life in the woods, it has to be lived. A few days hanging around a logging crew will not suffice. I believe we should train existing leaders from the logging industry who know the unique struggles of life in the woods. This lends credibility and empathy. Loggers are less apt to take advice from someone who has never walked in their shoes. While conducting a recent workshop, a logging contractor said that the guys would connect with me since I had experienced the same things they had. The secret to success in bringing these skills into the woods, is to marry these two together, experienced loggers with a desire to make the job a safer more productive place though the soft skills of management.

It is a tall order to create fertile ground in the woods for employee engagement in order to lay down the roots to infuse it into the culture to make it the norm. Any initiative needs to start somewhere, one way to start is to make it part of the things that loggers like. Equipment shows, organizational meetings, make it present in the standards set by organizations offering harvest and individual certification, as well as articles in trade magazines. This only scratches the surface; these principles need to be infused into the day, over and over. Workshops can start the ball rolling with an educational overview for broader understanding; successful change happens though reinforcing behavior day in and day out, over and over again.

How do we get this training to loggers who work from sun up to sundown? Bring it to the job? Create a leadership program that can be implemented at a tailgate, or an executive coach in the woods. One possible way is leadership mentors. Executive coaches are a mainstay in the corporate world, some companies budget them in for executives whether they want them or not. The reason that this is done is not because the coach has greater business acumen than a newly promoted executive, but they have the ability to be objective, and to stand back and coach based on leadership principles. This hurdle can be overcome with dedicated individuals from the woods who want to strengthen the forest products chain through the soft skills of management.

## **CONCLUSION**

In logging we are faced with a dwindling labor pool. Professor Egan's study uncovered the lack of professionalism as one of the main reasons that parents deter kids from entering the profession of logging in Maine. (Egan 2007) A logging company's most important asset is the people who lead their people. We need to infuse professionalism into the woods by making this training available to those companies that want to partake. We need to offer training that takes into account the unique life that our loggers live in the woods. Creating leaders that understand their main job is to get the most out of each and every employee. Yes, sometimes that means you have to be a babysitter, and yes sometimes that means you have to hold someone's hand. NO, you cannot coach everyone to success, but everyone deserves the chance to be coached to success. Turnover is costly, and the one of the main reasons employees leave their job is because of their immediate supervisor, it's not usually the company they work for.

We need to sit up and take notice of the job we have before us. Not just the job of purifying the path of the wood, but the job of making this type of training readily available to the men and women who have chosen to work close to the land, who love the smell of wood and who would rather eat lunch on a stump than a fine dining establishment. We have turned away from those things to work near nature, but we need to know that we are valued enough to be strengthened, just as much as the product we move. The people side of timber harvesting needs strengthening in order to keep the wood moving in a timely and safe fashion. We need to protect and nurture our most important asset, our leaders in the forest.

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