

# CREW Chief

SUCCESS GUIDE Volume 6

# Time to Step Up

**“When a crew leader takes ownership of their work, equipment and personnel, you will see a crew that does great and efficient work.” – David Hupman, The Brickman Group**

**The best landscape companies are asking more of their crew leaders, and the crew leaders are delivering.**  
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A Supplement to  
GREEN INDUSTRY

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## Getting More for Less



Dear Crew Chiefs,

As I read the list of articles included in this issue of *Crew Chief Success Guide*, I was struck by the theme of doing more for less. In a tough economy, more than ever, everyone is seeking the best possible value for their investment, whether it's your customers wanting more value from you or you wanting to get more from your suppliers...and your employees.

When it comes to getting more out of your equipment, perhaps the single most important thing is proper maintenance. Following the manufacturer's instruction manual can extend the life of your power tools. In this issue of *Crew Chief Success Guide*, be sure to check out the article, "Preventive Maintenance Tips for Lawn Equipment," for advice from servicing dealers.

Proper maintenance and operation will also help ensure you get the best fuel efficiency. See the article, "11 Ways Your Crews Can Help Reduce Fuel Costs," for specific tips.

Another way to reduce fuel costs can be to invest in equipment with some of the newer low-emission technologies – improved fuel efficiency typically goes hand in hand with reduced emissions, so you can do something good for your wallet and the environment. Low-emission engines, like those on the STIHL BR 500, 550 and 600 – the cleanest running engines in their class, also help maintain productivity in exhaust emissions restricted areas. And the STIHL BR 500 is also low noise for sound restricted environments.

You can find other helpful information at resources such as [www.greenindustrypros.com](http://www.greenindustrypros.com), [www.stihlusa.com/information](http://www.stihlusa.com/information) and the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) website [www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org).

Sincerely,

John Keeler  
National Training Manager  
STIHL Inc.

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## How to become a better crew leader

Leadership Tips from Jim Paluch of JP Horizons

If people believe they are being asked to do more of the things that are outside of their comfort zone, it's easy for them to stop enjoying what they are doing. If they stop enjoying what they are doing, it reflects on their personal motivation, performance and results they achieve.

**There are some things you can do to avoid a downward spiral and meet the new demands of being a crew leader:**

1. Reconnect with what you really like about being a part of the Green Industry. Go as far as writing it down and posting it where you can see it every day.
2. Help the crew you lead by reminding them of what is great about this industry.
3. Don't be negative and/or destructive.
4. Don't minimize the importance of your actions by coming in late, not training or communicating, and displaying a poor attitude. Furthermore, blaming others is unbecoming of a leader.
5. Work unceasingly at personal growth and self improvement. As you commit to personal growth, some amazing outcomes will emerge:
  - You will reconnect with your real purpose for getting into the Green Industry and for becoming a leader.
  - You will learn to think creatively, beyond what you are currently doing, to find ways to achieve what you need to achieve while remaining connected to your personal values.
  - You will understand the value of training for yourself and for your crew.
  - You will receive recognition for your efforts from both the customer and the company you work for.
  - You will start sleeping a lot better because you'll know that you're helping your crew do the best job possible based on the customer's expectations and your employer's demands.

For over 20 years Jim Paluch and the JP Horizons Team have been helping landscape companies Work Smarter and create A Better Way. Learn how they do it at [ABetterWayCommunity.com](http://ABetterWayCommunity.com), or email [jim@jphorizons.com](mailto:jim@jphorizons.com).

**To read this article in its entirety or to share it with other members of your team, check it out online at [greenindustrypros.com/10622787](http://greenindustrypros.com/10622787).**

# Time to Step Up

By Gregg Wartgow

## THE BEST LANDSCAPE COMPANIES ARE ASKING MORE OF THEIR CREW LEADERS, AND THE CREW LEADERS ARE DELIVERING.

A few trends have emerged over the past few years. Customers demand more and want to pay less. Costs such as fuel are much higher. And leading landscape companies are relying more on their crew leaders to help manage both of these challenges.

### HELPING THE COMPANY MAKE MONEY

"With contract pricing going down, the crew leader now has a greater emphasis on efficiency and cutting waste out of each task, while still maintaining the quality that is expected," says David Hupman, production specialist at The Brickman Group's Ohio division.

"The biggest thing we are expecting

out of our crew leaders is ownership," Hupman continues. "We need to show them what that looks like, doing simple things like keeping trucks clean. When a crew leader takes ownership of their work, equipment and personnel, you will see a crew that does great and efficient work." Hupman is the current chairman elect of PLANET's International Certification Council, and is a Landscape Industry Certified Manager and Technician himself.

Out in Arizona, David Spector of Mesa-based TLC - The Landscape Company says his crew leaders are not only responsible for quality and training, but are always thinking of ways to improve efficiency and economy. "This is everything from shutting off truck engines to

maximizing the efficacy of each laborer," Spector adds.

### SALES SUPPORT

Some landscape companies are also looking for crew leaders to aid in the sales, marketing and customer service process. One such firm is Mariani Landscape in Lake Bluff, IL, a specialist in the high-end residential market.

"Several years ago we'd come up with something we call 'one point of contact,'" says Ed Furner, maintenance client representative for Mariani. "That meant we wanted one primary link between the client and the company, and that link was the salesperson (maintenance client representative). The salesperson then relayed information from the client to

the crew, and vice versa. That's changing today. We now want our crew leaders to have great working relationships with the property owners."

The goal is to avoid wasting a busy client's time. For example, when the client has a good relationship with a crew leader, the client will feel comfortable telling the crew leader about problems they'd like addressed during a specific visit. Previously, the client would call the salesperson and the salesperson would then call the crew leader—but the crew was often long gone from the property before they got the message.

Today it's all about good communication and immediate response to client needs. The crew leader plays an important role in making that happen by establishing connection with the client.

"We encourage our crew leaders to knock on doors and check in with clients when they arrive on properties," Furner

*"We now want our crew leaders to have great working relationships with the property owners." - Ed Furner, Mariani Landscape*

tells. "Before, we told them to simply arrive on time, fire up the equipment and get going. Now we want them to let the client know they're there, and find out if anything special needs to be done."

Furner does point out that not every client wants to interact with the crew. That's fine—and the crew is made aware if that is the case. But a highly professional crew that can interact with clients is "added value" which you can offer.

### WHAT YOUR COMPANY CAN DO FOR YOU

Industry-leading companies like Mariani Landscape are taking steps to make sure crew leaders have the knowledge and tools to get the job done. "We've always been pretty aggressive with our training program, but are constantly adapting," Furner points out. "For instance, we now go over customer service issues with our crew leaders. Those who are pretty proficient in English are quite comfortable with this."

While customer service is taking on a heightened level of importance, you can't overlook hands-on technical training. "We (Brickman) require training sessions to be held prior to when a task needs to be done," Hupman says. "Let's take mowing in the Ohio market, for example. We usually start operations around April 1. That means we want the crew leader trained by March 15, which includes a visit to each of the properties to walk each site and explain the scope of each job. It would be very easy if every job received the same services. But each job is different. It's imperative for the crew leader to understand what is 'sold' on each job."

TLC - The Landscape Company also provides an extensive training program, pays for more formal training, and stays involved in its state association (ALCA). As a result, Spector says they expect crew leaders to gain certifications and continue their education in order to stay competitive within their own peer groups.

Systems to improve communication have become just as important as training. "We've developed a top-notch work order and work report system to facilitate communications between the crew leader, the office and clients," Spector says. In addition, crew leaders are involved in weekly meetings at the office, site meetings, and a variety of social functions. "The social functions

*"When a crew leader takes ownership of their work, equipment and personnel, you will see a crew that does great and efficient work."  
- David Hupman, The Brickman Group*

facilitate opportunities for a wide range of discussion topics by putting our crew leaders at ease with upper management," Spector says. "This works for all divisions of our company."

Brickman has put a detailed site inspection report system in place. "Each job has a folder," Hupman explains. "If an operations manager, account manager or anyone else does a site visit, 'next-visit expectations' are inserted into the folder for the crew leader to use. If the client wants to meet the crew leader on site, this is also communicated on the site report as well as the schedule board. We use this process with both maintenance and installation projects."

All of this training and process implementation is done for one primary reason: improve customer satisfaction. Accountability helps ensure that everything comes together as intended.

"Our crew leaders are now held accountable for client satisfaction and retention," Furner says. "We are offering an incentive program this year for supervisors (production coordinators) and crew leaders to be efficient, maintain quality and receive fewer complaints. Incentives don't always have to be monetary, either. You could hand out awards, for instance. Employees just need something to strive for." ◀



Photo courtesy of Grant & Power Landscaping in Chicago.



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# Careful Concrete Cutting

FOLLOW THESE GUIDELINES TO GET BETTER LIFE AND PERFORMANCE OUT OF YOUR CUT-OFF MACHINE.

A commercial-duty cut-off machine can slice through things like paver stones, retaining wall blocks and pre-cast concrete—helping you and your crews more efficiently complete hardscape jobs of all shapes and sizes. Also commonly known as concrete saws, cut-off saws and power cutters, these tools are not cheap. A good one can run upwards of \$1,000 or more. As crew leader, it's your job to make sure you and your crewmates operate these

tools with care—keeping unnecessary wear and tear in mind, not to mention safety.

## SAFETY FIRST

To reduce the risk of injury, the operator should wear proper protective apparel. This includes:

- Heavy-duty, non-slip work gloves
- Sturdy boots with non-slip soles; steel-toed safety boots are highly recommended
- Properly fitted safety glasses or goggles with adequate top and side protection and meeting ANSI Z87.1
- Hard hat
- Ear plugs or muffers

Clothing must be sturdy and snug-fitting, but allow complete freedom of movement. Avoid loose-fitting jackets, scarfs, neckties, jewelry, flared pants, unconfined long hair, or anything that could become caught on any obstacles or moving parts of the unit.

Wear overalls or long pants to protect your legs. Never wear shorts.

### Use the right kind of cutting wheel.

First of all, make sure the speed rating of the cutting wheel is above or equal to the spindle speed of the cut-off machine. Furthermore, only use wheels that are authorized for use with your equipment and the type of material being cut. Diamond wheels are generally better when it comes to things like pavers. See your product instruction manual and/or consult your dealer just to make sure.

## BEFORE YOU START TO CUT

Ensure that all of the controls and safety devices are working properly. Ensure that the idle and maximum speed are correctly adjusted, the wheel is prop-

erly mounted, and the wheel guard is securely fastened.

Adjust the wheel guard so that sparks and dust are directed away from the operator and can't reach anything flammable in the area. Wet cutting is an excellent way to reduce the risk of health hazards associated with dust when cutting concrete.

Finally, make sure the drive belt is properly tensioned, and check a second time after an hour or so of use.

## OPERATING TIPS

Get a solid grip—and use two hands. Hold the machine steady. Apply the cutting wheel gently at full throttle. Keep the machine in line with the wheel. Pressure from the side can damage the wheel and cause it to jam. Simply move the wheel slowly forward and backward in the direction of the cut. Maintain full speed until the cut is complete, allowing the machine to work without applying downward pressure. The cutting depth per pass should not exceed 2.5 inches.

Never grind with the side of the wheel; doing so results in wheel damage.

Check the wheel for cracks or chips during rest times. Also check the wheel guard for any damage.

To reduce the risk of kickback, avoid cutting with the upper front quadrant of the wheel. Be alert to potential movement of the workpiece (i.e. paver) or anything else that could cause the cut to close and pinch the wheel. Make sure the workpiece is properly supported so that the cut remains open during the entire cutting process.

# Paver Patio Installation Tips

BELGARD'S CHUCK TAYLOR OUTLINES COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID.

According to Charles "Chuck" Taylor, a commercial hardscapes expert for Belgard Hardscapes, some contractors don't spend enough time properly constructing a paver patio's base. "If you do this step right," Taylor reminds, "putting in the sand bed and installing the pavers themselves is so much easier."

Taylor offers the following tips to help you avoid many of the common mistakes contractors often make.

**EXCAVATE A BIG ENOUGH AREA** to accommodate both the pavers and the edge restraint. That way, the edge restraint and pavers will be supported by the same aggregate material. A good rule of thumb is to excavate an extra 6 inches on each side.

**DIG THE HOLE DEEP ENOUGH;** 7 to 9 inches for pedestrian traffic, 9 to 11 inches for vehicular traffic or around pools. This will give you the necessary room to build a strong foundation; 4 to 6 inches of gravel for pedestrian traffic, 6 to 8 inches of gravel for vehicular traffic or around pools.

Make sure you're creating a 2% pitch away from the house so water won't sit on the patio. If you want a flat surface, you should look into permeable pavers,

which allow water to flow between the pavers and into the ground, offering the added environmental benefit of reducing stormwater runoff.

**GRAVEL.** Get the base (gravel) layer to a finished grade minus paver thickness and setting bed thickness that is plus or minus half an inch, so the gravel is basically a mirror image of the paver surface. Take your time and do a good job compacting it so it's smooth and straight. A 5,000-pound plate compactor should provide plenty of force. Some contractors try 2,500-pounders, but that's often not enough.

**SAND.** The next layer is the sand bed. Shoot for a 1- to 1.5-inch depth. Use a concrete sand, steering away from mason sand or stone dust which are both too fine. Use a 2x4 to level the sand.

**PAVERS.** Then, starting in a 90° corner, begin laying pavers from the outside-in so you're not messing up the leveled sand layer. Leave roughly 1/8-inch between pavers.

**FINISHING UP.** Once you're finished installing the pavers, use that same 5,000-pound compactor. If you're using a paver with a slate finish, be sure to use some kind of protective layer on the compactor. "I've seen everything," Taylor relates. "I've seen contractors use

plywood, carpet, even mud flaps."

Finally, once the job is complete, don't forget to hose off the patio and clean up your jobsite. Then the client can enjoy his or her new space which you've helped create. ◀



## TRANSPORT AND STORAGE

Before you load your cut-off machine onto the trailer, remove the wheel. Once back at the shop, store the wheel on a flat, level surface. Make sure the area is not in direct sunlight or subject to humid conditions, or frost if it's cold. Failure to follow these guidelines can result in broken or damaged wheels.

Finally, be sure to inspect the wheel

before heading back out to the jobsite for further use. Check to see if the wheel is warped or if any cracks exist. Mount the wheel in the same direction as it was used before. ◀

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This article includes merely a quick overview of basic safe operating procedures. As always—read, understand and fol-

low the directions in your product instruction manual, along with the various safety symbols and warnings that appear throughout the manual and on the product itself.

STIHL offers a cut-off machine DVD. Check out the video clips at [stihldealer.net/videolibrary](http://stihldealer.net/videolibrary).

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## Preventive Maintenance

The following is a rundown of the most common—and most preventable—causes of equipment downtime. Jason Hicks, service manager for West Chester Lawn & Garden in Liberty Township, OH, advises his landscape customers to put together a “preventive checklist” each crew chief should run through each morning before heading into the field.

**Oil and Filters.** An engine will eventually start to use some oil; typically units with over 1,000 hours of use that are out of warranty. “If oil isn’t properly added, you could end up with a ‘lack of lubrication’ failure, resulting in the need for a short block or complete engine replacement,” Hicks points out. “This is an \$800 to \$1,000 repair that could have been avoided by simply checking the oil.”

Change the oil within the first 10 hours of use, and then every 50 to 100 hours. Oil filters can be changed every other oil change. However, oil checks should be completed daily.

**Air Filters.** A clogged air filter can result in a rich-running engine, causing excessive carbon buildup. On the other hand, by keeping air filters clean or replaced, you will reduce dirt indigestion and increase air circulation.

“Keep a maintenance log for your units, and observe what the manufacturer recommendations are for service intervals,” Hicks says. “Stay close to those recommendations. Warranty can be denied when there has been a lack of maintenance.”

“Keep in mind,” adds Jay Gaskins of STI-Turf Care Equipment, “that not all air filters are created equal. There are different types for different applications. Consult with your dealer or owner’s manual to determine which is best suited to your needs.” STI has outlets in North and South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee.

“Also remember to clean out the actual air filter box when replacing or cleaning air filters,” Gaskins continues. “Furthermore,

I would suggest purchasing at least one extra filter and pre-filter with each new filter purchase—because if you have it on hand, you’re more likely to use it.”

**Belt Condition.** As inexpensive as they are, belts can result in very costly downtime and an unnecessary trip to the service facility. You might want to consider keeping extra belts in the truck that could be put on in the field.

**Tire Pressure.** Another thing you can do is keep an eye on tire pressure. Keeping tire pressures at correct levels will increase performance and efficiency, while also minimizing tire wear and flats.

There’s a side benefit when it comes to mowers: Properly inflated tires will improve cut quality. “Tire pressure is important for checking deck level,” Hicks explains. “A low tire on one side directly affects the cutting level—and quality.”

**Blades.** “Similarly, I don’t think it’s a mystery that sharp blades produce the healthiest and most manicured lawns,” Gaskins adds. “Sharp, balanced blades are also critical to the life of your machine. Unsharpened blades cause unneeded stress to pulleys, spindles, belts, engines, gear boxes and clutches. Additionally, unbalanced blades can cause abnormal vibration, resulting in spindle or gear box damage, not to mention long-term damage to the cutting deck components.”

**Lubrication.** It’s critical to grease high-revolution parts such as blade spindles and wheel bearings on a daily basis. The type of grease you use is also critical. For most applications, Gaskins recommends spending a bit more on a better grade of high-temperature grease, which won’t dissipate as quickly as a less-expensive, multi-purpose grease.

Finally, keep in mind that gear boxes for handheld equipment such as string trimmers and hedgetrimmers typically need special greases. Consult with your servicing dealer. ◀

### 11 WAYS YOUR CREW CAN HELP REDUCE FUEL COSTS

1. Meet regularly with your crew to discuss the importance of conserving fuel. Ask for ideas. The meeting doesn’t have to be anything elaborate; drive time between jobs is a splendid venue.

2. Keep warm-up time and idling to a minimum; no more than two minutes.

3. If your truck has a mileage computer, pay attention to it. One crew leader said he tries to keep it above 10 miles per gallon when accelerating from a stop and over 25 mpg when cruising.

4. Drop the throttle back just a bit on your riding mower—especially in light grass or tight areas.

5. Don’t run trimmers, edgers or blowers wide open.

6. Pay attention to truck and equipment maintenance—especially fluids, lubes and tire pressure.

7. Mow with properly sharpened blades, which help you cut through grass with less resistance.

8. Also on the topic of mowing, adhering to the one-third rule can help. Cutting no more than 33% of the shoot growth in a single mowing will prevent excessive clipping yield, which is a prime catalyst for increased engine load.

9. Talk to your boss about doing irrigation checks and installing annuals so he might be able to avoid sending another crew to the property later in the week. If you don’t feel like you have the knowledge in these areas, talk to your boss about how you can get it.

10. While talking with your boss, bring up the topic of four-day workweeks. Would your guys mind working, say, four 12-hour days? What about three 15’s?

11. Last but not least, avoid filling up in the heat of the day, as gasoline expands in the heat.

Visit [greenindustrypros.com/10260317](http://greenindustrypros.com/10260317) to read the complete report on reducing fuel costs.



Jerry Clay, Owner  
Clay's Power Equipment  
Raleigh, NC  
Fuquay-Varina NC

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Mark Barbour  
Project Supervisor  
Dennis' 7 Dees  
Portland, Oregon

## Building a green space in Portland's airspace.

Incoming passengers to Portland International Airport are now greeted by a "green" roof, thanks in part to *Dennis' 7 Dees*, a longtime Portland landscaping and garden center. The eco roof project was huge, at 10,000 sq. ft. They installed a modular tray system and a LEED-certified irrigation system. The work was challenging and Mark Barbour says "we couldn't have done it without the reliability and power of our STIHL products, especially our

STIHL Cutquik® cut-off machines." Their environmental commitment is another reason why Barbour and his team swear by low emission STIHL products in this eco-centric northwest city. For their green projects, they stand by STIHL orange.

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