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Investment in Communication Pays Quick Dividends

John and Kelly Banner operate a successful nursery. They initially started in 1980 growing shrub liners and heathers, but shortly after they expanded into the container perennials for which they are now known. With three locations across North America, they have become one of the largest wholesale producers of herbaceous perennials on the continent. John and Kelly built their business on the strength of their market leadership and innovation.

Promotion at the nursery was based on skill level, and often employees who were considered to be skilled horticulturists were promoted to supervisory positions. Without formal training, each supervisor had a different approach.

One newly appointed supervisor decided to try a more friendly and relaxed approach with the employees in her work group. Initially this style appeared to be working well; however, within a few months the group's productivity began to slow down. The supervisor turned to others for advice and was told to take a tougher approach and to get rid of any troublemakers. Reluctantly, she began to take a very forceful attitude towards her workers, which resulted in poor morale, low productivity and conflicts. After one heated dispute, an unhappy worker filed a formal harassment complaint.

The harassment complaint was the catalyst that brought the severity of this problem to John and Kelly's attention. Immediately, they began to review the way in which they appointed supervisors. They soon realized that production skill alone was not enough to qualify someone for a supervisory role. Supervisors needed training in communication, conflict resolution, and providing and accepting feedback.

With help from an outside consulting group, John and Kelly organized a series of workshops to address these issues. The supervisors who were quick to grasp the concept noticed immediate results in both the attitude and productivity of their workers. When the workers felt they were being listened to, they had more of a sense of duty to the supervisor, and before long, production was higher than it had ever been.

While still appreciating the importance of technical production expertise, the Banners now always consider communication skills when choosing new supervisors, and they provide support for continuing development of these skills across all levels of management.