

PLANET peer groups offer strength in numbers

Experience is a great teacher, but it's not the only educator in town. For several years, now, industry peer groups have been offering CEOs an opportunity to share best practices, including proprietary information, with noncompeting company executives from around the country. As explained by industry veteran and long-time group facilitator Bruce Wilson, the purpose of these groups is to allow CEOs to

- (1) openly share business practices and strategies,
- (2) challenge each others' thought processes in a constructive manner, and
- (3) serve as an informal board of directors for each other.

Last year, PLANET formed its first peer group and retained the Wilson-Oyler Group to act as facilitator. Since then, three groups have been formed under the direction of Bruce K. Wilson and his partner Tom Oyler.

The "Pioneer" peer group consists of six company executives who, as Wilson related, share many common characteristics, the most important of which is they "want to grow."

Members Jim and Peggy Berns of Berns Landscaping Services in Warren, Mich., hosted the Pioneer group's initial meeting last spring and have since attended a second meeting and participated in conference calls. The Berns, who have been in business for 30 years, operate a full-service landscape management company that employs 35 to 45 people and features a 40 percent commercial and 60 percent residential customer mix. In the following Q & A, Peggy gives her thoughts on why she and Jim decided to join a peer group and what they expect to gain from their participation.

Q. Why would someone like you and Jim, with 30 years of industry experience, decide to join a peer group?

A. That's easy. You never stop learning and every company owner, no matter how long he or she has been in business, has



particular strengths and weaknesses. We wanted to share what we think our strengths are and learn from others to shore up our perceived weaknesses. The peer group offers this opportunity.

Q. What do you think other company executive can learn from you? In other words, what do you bring to the table?

A. One of our strengths is being able to offer customers a complete service package. We've done this for years and would be very open to sharing our successes in this area with other group members.

Q. Is there anything specific you would like to learn from your peer group members?

A. Not really, but in a broader sense we wanted to join a group comprised of a few companies that are a little bigger

than we are. We want to continue to grow and look forward to learning from their best practices.

Q. What's your impression so far of your group?

A. We've only had two face-to-face meetings so far, but members seem to be a good fit and everyone will likely have something of value to add. I've been told that being in a peer group is like having your own private board of directors. Right now, we're getting to know each other, but as we go forward, I suspect that will be the case. We will be holding each other accountable for actions we say we will be taking to improve our operations.

If you join a group

What can PLANET members expect if they join a group? Wilson offers this

brief overview. "Face-to-Face meetings typically occur over two days, with business sessions sandwiched between two dinners. The meetings themselves include discussions of business issues, such as pricing pressures, H-2B, labor trends, staffing/recruiting, competition, market dynamics, and economic trends.

"Benchmarking comparisons follow the discussions, after which each company has between 1 hour and 1½ hours for a presentation of specific issues. During an open session, meetings will typically include special speakers and special industry guests."

Wilson also notes that all member companies are required to sign a non-disclosure agreement to ensure that discussions remain private and the proprietary information remains confidential and exclusive to group members.

Experience counts

PLANET peer groups provide a perfect venue for CEOs and senior leaders to share



Pioneer Peer Group members met for one of their face-to-face sessions at the Green Industry Conference in Louisville.

their experiences—their skills and best practices. While one's experience is a great teacher, imagine the learning that can be accomplished with six veterans at the table. There truly is strength in numbers. "The setting does more than foster knowledge and build success," added Wilson. "Peer-to-peer networking also creates lasting relationships among its membership."

In each of this year's upcoming issues of *PLANET News*, we'll feature more insights from various peer group members. If you'd like more information about PLANET peer groups or about joining one, go online to LandcareNetwork.org and from the Education/Events tab, select Peer Groups. ~

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