

After 13 years, it was time to reassess



Thirteen years in business is a long time considering how many businesses never reach such a milestone.

Peter Shaw began his business, Ocean Road Landscaping, 13 years ago and is proud of his achievement. "The business is very much a reflection of the economy and the we have experienced times of hardship as well as plenty of success," Peter said.

To see if he could flatten out the highs and lows of his business, Peter decided the business needed some independent advice. He enrolled in the Victorian Government's free workforce planning program, *My Business, My People* which is available to businesses that employ 5-100 staff. After signing up online (www.business.vic.gov.au/mybusinessmypeople) a business consultant visited Peter at his business in Torquay.

At the start of the 2008, Peter had 20 employees to service his landscape construction, design and maintenance business. When he sat down with Graeme Reece and Malcolm Weaver from Tourism Alliance Victoria business had slowed down.

"We're going through a slower patch now and we've restructured our business a bit," Peter said. "It's been a good time to do this program and look at how the business is tracking and tidy things up a bit."

The consultants told Peter that the problem is often not about the lack of skilled staff but that the staff are not right for the business. Taking an objective look at a company's organisational chart can identify issues such as an unproductive workforce (too many people doing too little) and that investing time to develop key staff can increase a business' prospects.

"We've cut back to 10 full-time staff, backed up by two or three casuals," Peter said. "We feel we've got a really strong workforce now and we're concentrating on developing the people we've got and stabilising the business."

Peter has always invested in his staff and had strong retention, but he wanted to make sure his staff had access to training to increase their skills and develop their roles.

"Some of the staff were put into leadership roles without any formal training," Peter said. "They were doing a reasonable job but I can see the improvement since we accessed training through this program."

Through the *My Business, My People* program, Peter enrolled his staff into several training programs and received a 50 per cent government subsidy. These include a course called *The New Team Leader*, an *Experienced Team Leader* course, a *Day-to-Day Management* course, a *Project Management* course and a *Tender Writing and Submissions* course.

As the leader of the business, Peter knew that he also needed to access training to improve his skills.



"I did an *Advanced Team Leader* program and I saw how I was viewed a bit clearer," Peter said. "I realised how quickly I can become the enemy and how the language I use and the way I say things can have an enormous impact on how people respond. I also discovered how quickly a bad perception by staff can be changed into a positive by being a strong leader."

Peter said some of the other suggestions proposed in the action plan included:

- Providing tools to build on recruitment process through accessing online templates (www.business.vic.gov.au/mybusinessmypeople.com.au) and utilising the 9-step recruiting technique suggested by Malcolm
- Conducting a half-day planning session with a facilitator (subsidised by 50 per cent by the government) to build on internal communications and get people involved in the future plans for the business
- Formalising recruitment procedure by utilising online interview templates (www.business.vic.gov.au/mybusinessmypeople.com.au), developing role descriptions and key performance criteria for new staff
- Sitting down with staff and drawing up a career road map outlining expectations, roles and their desired career outcomes
- Increasing marketing activity to promote the business and demonstrate key benefits of working with Ocean Road Landscaping
- Developing a training manual so staff are better equipped to make business decisions and Peter can concentrate more on winning new business

"This program is a fantastic idea," Peter said. "Most small business owners are skilled in what they do but they're not always great at managing their workforce. Even a little bit of help to access training is better than nothing. The program is excellent and the fact it is free and is being funded by the government is really terrific."