

THE FORGOTTEN TEAM MEMBER

By Kenneth Walker

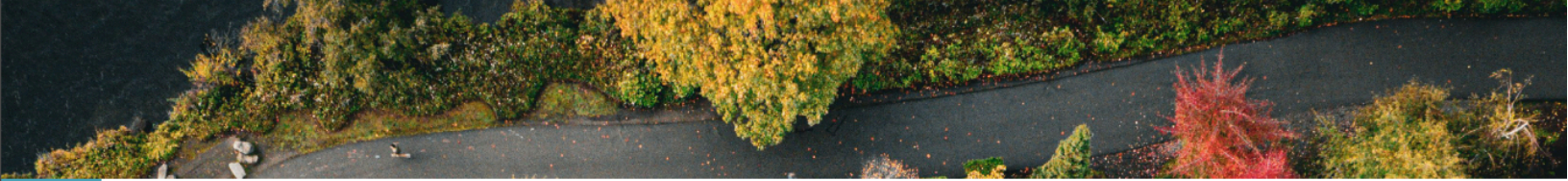
Have you ever pulled up to a place of business and found that the presentation of the establishment didn't meet your expectations? Maybe the parking lot was dirty or the grass wasn't cut. Have you ever bought a product and then had to pull around to pick it up from the back of the building, only to find a delivery truck blocking the loading dock? Once you received your product, did you still feel that the price you paid was warranted?

What if I told you that the right team member could solve all the problems I just mentioned—and many more? Do you believe it? I certainly do, simply because I've witnessed it. As a sales representative, I have come to see a lot of different dealers and how they operate, including their grounds and warehouse operations. What's more, my own hearth career started in the warehouse. I was responsible for all of the

above (and more). At the time, I admittedly didn't know then what I know now, so I didn't do as good of a job as others. But I was still able to improve the warehouse situation for my team.

Having the right person managing the grounds and warehouse of your business is often an overlooked task. This is the "Forgotten Team Member." Many business owners view this role as an unnecessary one that can be filled by anyone who isn't actively engaged in selling a product. As someone who has served as a warehouse manager, salesperson, installer, and store manager, I know that this is the furthest thing from the truth. This team member is arguably the most important person on your team. Let's discuss why. To that end, let's take a look at "Austin," a hypothetical grounds and warehouse manager.

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Austin is a quiet but self-motivated and detail-oriented guy who likes to be in the background, which makes him perfect for the warehouse manager position. Most of his days are spent constantly moving items around to make room for more items. He keeps busy by dealing with the trucking companies, receiving deliveries, checking in all the items received, putting all the items on the shelves, loading items into customers' vehicles, checking inventory for the sales staff, and pulling orders for the install crew in preparation for the next day—all at the same time! Austin has become a master of multitasking. Balancing incoming deliveries with outgoing purchases, along with everything else, is not for the faint of heart.

One day, an installer's helper calls in sick. Guess who's getting pulled to be a helper. Yep, that's right: Austin! After all, who else is going to get pulled? A salesperson? Probably not. Austin already knows all the item numbers from prepping the orders (possibly better than your sales staff). When Austin gets back from helping with the installation, he'll get to catch up on the deliveries that came in while he was gone. Simply

put, saying that Austin is a busy guy is quite an understatement.

As crazy as this scenario may sound, I've seen it with my own eyes. Having the right person in this position can make a business prosper. The sales staff, store manager, and owner are all happy because they don't have to worry about the cold, cavernous warehouse. The installation teams are happy because they get the correct items for their jobs. Having the wrong person in this position can make a business lose money in the form of dead inventory, damaged items, and a bad first impression due to the grounds looking unkempt.

And, come to think of it, we haven't even talked about the grounds yet. The warehouse manager is the perfect person to tend to the daily upkeep of the grounds. Often, the warehouse manager will be on site before the sales staff and possibly the store manager or owner. This is when blowing off the parking lot or cutting the grass and pulling weeds needs to be done. This team member is also the one who can point out when further maintenance is needed, such as painting or pressure washing. Often, the warehouse manager takes care of the small, overlooked maintenance items, such as changing light bulbs and air filters. The presentation of your storefront can determine how much money your customers are willing to spend once they get in your showroom. If the outside of your property looks neglected, they might not want to spend \$10,000 or more on a fireplace. I know this might sound presumptuous, but it's unfortunately the truth. Sure, you can pay a landscaping company to do most of this work, but that can be expensive, and they'll only come by once a month. Austin is there Monday through Friday with weekends off.

At this point, an important question arises: What do you need to look for when hiring a grounds and warehouse manager? I would start with a self-motivated person. There's

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nothing worse than a warehouse manager who must be constantly supervised. By default, most grounds and warehouse managers work alone. There are not many hearth stores or chimney companies that require more than one person in this capacity. So, this person resides in the back of a big, cold warehouse and works alone. That's not for everyone. But there are people out there that thrive in this kind of environment. Many of the warehouse managers I've met don't want to engage with customers, so it's a good fit. Being able to stay productive without being given a list of instructions is an invaluable skill set for a warehouse manager.

The next thing I would look for is a detail-oriented person. Everything a warehouse manager does is related to details. Part numbers, bills of lading, and freight inspections all require attention to detail. This team member is the first line of defense to ensure that items received are not damaged, that any items picked up by customers are in good condition, and that orders are pulled and prepped correctly. There's nothing worse than your installers getting to a job with the wrong parts.

The next thing I would look for is a person who's organized. Grounds and warehouse manag-



ers constantly bounce from one task to another. They need to be able to organize their daily tasks appropriately, and then reorganize those tasks again when something new gets thrown at them. And let me assure you: Something unexpected always gets thrown at them. That said, let's pause here for a moment and talk about exactly what being organized looks like. To be clear, your grounds and warehouse manager's idea of organization might differ from your own. Given that, you must come to an understanding of what's acceptable for both of you.

You need to give the manager ownership of the warehouse and grounds along with responsibility. This will probably mean giving up control of the warehouse and letting your manager run with it. If given the proper direction and guidance from the beginning, this should not be a problem. In fact, it should feel more like a burden has been lifted off your shoulders.

It should go without saying that grounds and warehouse managers must also be versatile. They'll need to drive forklifts that carry heavy and awkward items, lift these items high into the air, and unload and load items into trucks and other vehicles. Those

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tasks all require folks who can stay safe and be efficient at the same time. If they're managing the grounds, they'll need to be able to run small equipment like lawnmowers, weed eaters, and blowers. Being competent in the operation of these types of equipment and more is a must. They should also be willing to learn new skills as deemed necessary. They might be called on to fill in as a helper on installation teams when others call out sick. Part of their job involved recognizing ways to save time and make the warehouse more efficient and safer. Finally, having a working knowledge of general building maintenance is a big plus, but not required.

I know what you're thinking: This person, "Austin," is a figment of my imagination. I see how you could come to that conclusion, but I'll tell you the truth—he's not. I've met people like him in real

life. He is by no means perfect, but he's always eager to learn. The thing you need to remember is that you're unlikely to find the perfect person to be your grounds and warehouse manager. The team member you find will probably have some of these qualities, but not all of them. It's up to you to teach your new hire the rest. You just need to concentrate on finding someone with the right attitude and drive, and then set that person up for success by providing clear direction. There's little doubt that this manager will have questions along the way, and you'll need to provide answers. But this team member will succeed if you provide clear direction, quality tools, and ongoing support.

Given time, everything else will fall into place—and hopefully not off the top shelf.



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