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TREE CONSULTANCY

Professionalism: traditional values in a modern world

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Barrell Tree Consultancy is the only Arboricultural Practice in the UK with four Chartered Foresters in its ranks, providing a focus on professionalism at the heart of its business success. Managing Director, Jeremy Barrell, sets out his modern take on traditional values and speculates on its implications for arboriculturists and foresters alike.

Tree consultancy is evolving at breakneck speed, driven by the momentum of climate change and the emerging realisation by the establishment that trees really do matter. At the end of the 1990s, I was a one-man band working out of a back bedroom, advising homeowners what tree bits to chop off to give them more sun. In less than 10 years, our emphasis has dramatically shifted to 17 people focused on increasing canopy cover, rather than trying to get rid of it. The pace of change has been staggering because, although urban trees are not the answer to carbon footprints, they are a big part of the answer to mitigating urban temperature rises, and that matters. It directly affects the public, who understand that it is going to get hot and trees will make it more comfortable; a simple message that even the dumbest politicians are struggling to ignore. Trees will soon be on the political agenda in a big way, but do forestry and arboriculture have the professional infrastructure to deliver the management expertise that will inevitably be demanded?

In its purest form, professionalism can be distilled down to a list of duties that practitioners should strive to comply with, which include:

- **Competence** – working to a measured standard
- **Due care** – a level of performance necessary to fulfil specified requirements measured against a standard of care
- **Impartiality** – acting as a disinterested and unbiased third party
- **Independence** – free from influence, control or domination
- **Integrity** – candid, fair, honest and of sound moral principle
- **Objectivity** – free from personal influences, emotions or prejudices
- **Public trust** – honouring the public trust in professionals and serving the public interest

Such principles have been the mainstay of traditional professional practice, but how do these translate to the modern business arena?

All professionals should know that these duties are of fundamental importance, but we have found that they are not the only consideration in our commercial world. It would be quite feasible to religiously observe them all and be out of business in a matter of months if the figures did not add up! The challenge for modern professionals in business is to make a profit, with all the temptations and distractions of the commercial environment, whilst not straying outside this professional duty framework. A tough task that we think is more about psychology than rigidly following a set of pre-determined rules. Understanding the social interactions between the people in a business team and between that team and its clients is an essential part of business survival; complying with professional duties in isolation is not enough!

Culture is the shared beliefs and practices that identify a group of people and separate them from the crowd. Of course, at Barrell Tree Consultancy we comply with all our professional duties, but our psychological approach to employees and clients is unconventional. Commitment, passion and a culture of caring may not be a common business template, but our success proves that an emphasis on attitude and organisation works. We don't claim to have all the answers, but here are a few small pointers that seem to make a big difference for us:

- **Speed of delivery:** Modern business is about turning around client requirements very quickly. We answer the phone quickly, we get quotes back by return and anyone in the office can email document copies at the time of request. We rarely use the post; email is our preferred communication medium because it is instantaneous.
- **Instant access to records:** As our number of employees grew, we found that paper files were a problem because they could only be in one place at a time when they needed to be accessed by many people over the course of a project. Adoption of an electronic file management system allows access by anyone in the office at any time. This means any client can be updated on progress on their project by



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anyone in the office at the time of their phone call.

- **Record keeping:** Accurate and reliable records are a cornerstone of professional practice. We log every phone call, conversation and action for every job in its electronic folder. This allows us to monitor performance and progress literally by the minute, which allows us to provide instant client updates, understand the mechanics of our administration and keep a close track on finances.
- **Delivery expectations:** Over the years, we discovered that one of the greatest anxieties for clients is not knowing when a report is going to be delivered. By adopting a method of due dates and regular client updating, we found that client phone calls chasing reports stopped completely. Every job now has a due date, each client knows when that is and there has to be a very good reason not to honour it.
- **Exceed expectations:** Going that little bit further than expected is a great way of building client confidence. It demonstrates genuine commitment and care, which are so often missing from the 'have-a-nice-day' brigade.
- **Relieving client anxieties:** Nothing should be too much for us to do for our clients. Our role is to take control of their problems and deliver solutions, relieving them of all anxiety in the process. Our culture is to solve problems, not create them; once instructed, we take the strain.
- **Admin backup:** Our consultants get paid top salaries for organising, advising and project managing; it is a dreadful waste of that valuable resource to have them typing quotes or putting files away. For our seven consultants, we have 10 backup staff; a very heavy overhead, but the productivity gains are significant.
- **Placement of people within the office:** We originally had the separate departments within our business, consultants, CAD and admin, physically separate in different parts of the building, but it did not work very well. We found that reorganising our office structure into clusters of two consultants, one personal assistant and a CAD technician dramatically improved productivity. In place of department rivalry, we discovered a team culture that boosted morale and performance.
- **Consultant meetings:** It is tough to be isolated without colleagues on the same level to discuss difficult work issues with, but that is the plight of many consultants. Indeed, I had no regular interaction with other consultants when I first started and it was an obvious handicap. We now have seven consultants, all in the same office, and we have weekly meetings. Our ability to analyse issues means we solve problems faster and more efficiently; we have our very own arboricultural 'think-tank'!
- **Personal contact with clients:** Speaking with and meeting clients makes a big difference; it takes time and effort, but it pays big dividends. Automated phone systems and bulk processing sound attractive if short-term profits are the priority. However, our experience is that the traditional approach of building personal relationships is an enduring strategy because it works.
- **Demeanour:** Never forget that first impressions matter; the way you sound and look are the main clues that clients use to make judgments on capability and competence. A happy, cheerful disposition has a huge advantage over a listless voice and a slouching manner.
- **Working environment:** Office premises have a big impact on the perception of professionalism. We have new air-conditioned offices with high quality landscaping outside and a comfortable interior; our visitors are left in no doubt that we mean business.
- **Enthusiasm and passion:** Enthusiastic people that care about their job are more of an exception than the rule, but it makes a big difference. They come across more positively and even the most hesitant of clients are more prepared to engage if they detect a caring attitude.
- **Error analysis:** We do not like mistakes, but imperfection is an integral part of human nature; we all have off-days and sometimes it simply goes wrong. We do not shirk analysing errors to try to find effective ways of minimising the chance of repeating the same mistake.
- **Dealing with delivery failures:** Not honouring promises is extremely damaging, but



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sometimes unavoidable. As soon as we know a project will be late, we tell the client and reschedule. They may be annoyed but at least they know what is going on, which is much less damaging than the lateness being an unpleasant surprise!

- **Checking:** Every report and plan that leaves our office is checked at least twice by different people, with an audit trail that can backtrack any mistake to its source. This is resource-hungry but it motivates employees to take ownership of work and dramatically reduces our exposure to risk from errors.
- **Employee CPD:** Our CPD budget is not capped; all our staff can go on as many courses as they want. Perhaps we are lucky, but a CPD request has never been refused and our approach has never been abused.
- **Calibre of consultant:** We have no trainee consultants; every consultant can cope with any problem that arises. We are delivering top-end advice for a top-end price and our clients do not expect to be serviced by trainees.



Dave Cashman addressing the Surrey Tree Officers Group in 2007. We find that being a Chartered Forester is a universally recognised credential and enables us to deal with planning issues on the same level as other professionals.

- **Professional fees:** Delivering the type of service outlined above costs; we try to be slightly overstaffed to respond quickly, but that means the inevitable down-time has to be covered in our fee structure. Our fees have never been based on what other tree consultants charge; we compare ourselves to similar professions, such as surveyors and engineers, and match their rates. Our experience is that the best clients are very interested in value for money, rather than the cheapest price; we are rarely the cheapest.

- **Professional salaries:** Only the very best people can deliver the standards that we have set. Professionalism comes at a price, one that is set by the wider salary market. We match and exceed the salary and workplace packages offered by other allied professions, and have to continue to do so to retain the highest calibre of people.



Dave Cashman (standing) and Jeremy Barrell presented the first development site tree management workshops in New Zealand

- **Chartered status:** We have four Chartered Foresters and our other three consultants are in the system. It is a status recognised as the highest standard of achievement and allows us to interact with all other professions as equals, especially in the legal and planning arenas.



Mark Wadey and Jeremy Barrell presenting a two-day workshop on tree assessment in Brisbane as part of a four-city Australian tour. BTC have a very high international profile because we invest in exporting our expertise to other countries. These efforts are rarely financially viable but there are significant rewards in terms of our professional credibility.



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Speaking at international arboricultural conferences is an essential element of the BTC strategy for professional exposure. Jeremy Barrell presenting at the New Zealand Arboricultural Conference in Auckland

It would be easy to say these are our 'trade-secrets', but they are nothing new; just common sense applied to common problems that anyone can do if they think it through. For aspiring business professionals, which of the above is most important would be a good question. An equally good answer would be, 'none'! Every word and every action of every employee has the potential to make or break a business; everything matters. Professionalism is understanding this in depth and delivering it within the professional duty framework.