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BEST CONTRACTOR TO WORK FOR

Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical Inc., Crystal Lake, Ill.





Employee growth and recognition are words to live by for our first contest winner.

by Kelly Faloon



Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical Vice President Scott Underwood (left); President Rick Sperando; and Operations Manager Dave Growney (right).

PM'S 2006 BEST CONTRACTOR TO WORK FOR: **Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical Inc.**

"A company filled with good people." "The best company I have ever worked for." "They have given me the tools and knowledge to be successful." "I couldn't imagine working anywhere else." "I am treated as if I am part of the family." "Employee appreciation seeps out of everyone here." "Management is always willing to listen and adjust."

These are just a few of the comments from employees of Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical, Crystal Lake, Ill., our 2006 winner of the Best Contractor to Work For Contest. When *Plumbing & Mechanical* decided to begin this contest, we weren't sure what kind of response we would get. We didn't know if we'd

get people nominations or company nominations.

We certainly didn't expect the outpouring of admiration and respect for the winner of our inaugural contest; by the comments received, Black Diamond's employees really enjoy working for this suburban Chicago plumbing contractor.



PM Editor Steve Smith (center) presents the 2006 Best Contractor to Work For plaque to the management of Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical (left to right): Patty Sperando, CEO; Rick Sperando, president; Dave Growney, operations manager; and Scott Underwood, vice president.

You'll hear more from Black Diamond's employees later, but first, a little background on the company.

The Black Diamond Story: The two partners in this endeavor are **Rick Sperando**, president, and **Scott Underwood**, vice president; the company celebrated its eighth anniversary last October. However, Sperando says he could never have made the business successful without his wife, **Patty**, who is the company's chief executive officer. He says she is responsible for a lot of the niceties that visitors and employees alike find in the building and work environment.

The firm's operations manager is the Sperando's son-in-law, **Dave Growney**. When the Sperando's retire, Growney will take over. And because of the family atmosphere at Black Diamond, as well as Growney's interaction with employees, there will be a "smooth transition," Sperando says.

Daughter **Jaclyn Szymczak** also works in the company as the financial analyst.

There are four additional parts of the business: Crystal Construction (general contracting); Black Diamond Plumbing & Electrical (electrical arm); Illinois Plumbing Consultants (the education business); and Trisha Properties (property holding compa-

ny). With all of these businesses, Black Diamond has its fingers in all aspects of real estate and construction.

But Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical is the "engine that has driven all the other entities," Sperando states. Company revenues in 2005 were \$4.1 million; the company is expecting to report 2006 revenues of \$4.8 million. Seventy percent of that business is service, while the remaining 30 percent is commercial new construction business.

With 31 employees (eight in the office, 23 in the field), Black Diamond has a lot of employee loyalty. Turnover for the past 10 years has been about 4 percent, Sperando notes. Part of the reason for such low turnover is the time and attention given to employees in the form of training and recognition.

Black Diamond has its own apprentice school, headed up by **Joe Pienschke**, as well as continuing education classes for journeymen plumbers. The company also will be starting an electrical school. Students come to class for two hours twice a week. A two-story training "house" was built inside Black Diamond's shop facility to show students how to pipe and plumb toilets, sinks and showers, as well as how to connect water pipe inside and outside a home.

"We run this as an open forum," Sperando says. "They bring in their problems, and learn to solve them in class. The school doesn't make money, but someone has to teach these kids the craft."

Recognizing the hard work of its employees is also a big part of Black Diamond's business philosophy. "This is truly a 'family business,'" Growney says. "We try to do something for the employees about four times a year."

Those activities include ice-skating parties, bowling, Halloween parties, etc. The company has one big bash a year where everyone can get gussied up, usually around a theme, Growney says — a Frank Sinatra impersonator one year, a murder mystery theme for another.

Black Diamond also thinks of the family when interviewing candidates, Sperando explains. Wives are brought in for the final interview so that various aspects of the job, such as the odd hours, can be explained to them.

And the company has an account at Morton's so that employees can take their families out to a nice dinner on the boss's tab.

Why does Black Diamond do so much for its employees?

"It takes about \$100,000 to train one employee," Sperando explains. "We've been very fortunate with our employees, and we want to keep them."

It comes down to this for Black Diamond: Work can be fun, and profitable, too.

The Employees Talk: What follows are the comments we received from Black Diamond employees about why the company is the "Best Contractor to Work For."

"I've worked for two other plumbing companies before joining the Black Diamond team. Since joining, I have been given better opportunities to forward my career, as well as make more money in the process. Before I joined Black Diamond, I had heard negative comments about it, but as an employee, my opinion is completely different. The owners and employees actually care about each other concerning work and family. I have come



Black Diamond throws several employee appreciation parties each year. The company also organizes holiday parties and family outings.

into a company filled with good people I consider friends and family. I believe there are few companies that offer what Black Diamond gives to each and every one of its employees.”

— **Jason Innis,**
service plumber

“As a service plumber, I talk to several customers a day. When I was working for another plumbing company and a customer would ask me how I liked working for that company, I would look down and dig deep to show some enthusiasm, lie to the customer and say I liked it. Today, it’s a different scenario. I am able to look a customer in the eye and with much pride and enthusiasm say that Black Diamond is the best company I have ever worked for. Black Diamond is the best because the owners, Rick Sperando and Scott Underwood, and their families make it feel like we are all family.”

— **Bill Baker,**
service plumber

“I like working for Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical because management is great to work for. They have given me the tools and knowledge to be

successful. I am able to service the customers properly and efficiently. Black Diamond has also given me the ability to move up in the company and reach beyond to achieve the company goals.”

— **Herb Tittle,**
service plumber

“I can honestly say, without an ounce of hesitation, that I couldn’t imagine working anywhere else. What truly sets Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical apart from any other employer is the constant sense of appreciation. Hard work and dedication do not go overlooked by any means. Whether it’s a sales contest, an appreciation/recognition event or just a little something special for your family around the holidays, Black Diamond never forgets about the actual individuals beyond the ‘employee.’

“Another wonderful aspect about Black Diamond Plumbing would definitely have to be the atmosphere. The overall working environment is beyond pleasant. Just walking in the front door, if you didn’t know prior to entering, you would never guess that we were a plumbing company. Black Diamond Plumbing as a whole prides itself on making the absolute best first impression each and every time. Not only does that apply to the service plumbers, but

to each aspect of Black Diamond.

“Above all, the people at Black Diamond are what really make the experience extraordinary. Everyone contributes their share to make the day-to-day operations run just a little smoother. Each person brings talents and skills that make the company so successful. Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical is a tapestry of hard-working and dedicated workers!”

— **Kim Halbisch,**
dispatcher

“I have been working full time for almost 16 years, most recently for Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical. Since becoming a part of the Black Diamond family in 2004, I have learned to really appreciate the differences between Black Diamond and my former employers. At Black Diamond, I am treated as if I were part of a family. The management welcomes and listens to all of my thoughts on how to make this a more successful company. They believe that a company is only as good as the employees you have, and they do everything in their power to make the employees happy with their workplace.

“We constantly have incentive programs and contests to boost earnings, as well as friendly competition among

employees. We have contest celebration parties and appreciation parties on a regular basis. We also have, in my opinion, the most professional and presentable plumbing shop in Illinois.

"In the shop, there is an area dedicated to the plumbing school. We have weekly classes, which are comprised of lectures and a mock house inside the school [where] students can apply these lessons in a practical application. I am truly blessed to have a career here at Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical and look forward to many years to come."

— **Terry Grossmayer,**
service plumber

"Working in a Fortune 500 corporation for 12 years, I was stifled in my job. I always thought my 'dream' job would be to work for a company that really cared about its employees.

"Two years ago, I walked into Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical for an interview and knew that my dream would come to fruition. The first day I started this position, I felt like I had known everyone here for years. Almost immediately, I started to have very strong feelings of true dedication and pride for Black Diamond. Whenever I am out shopping or at a restaurant, I feel 'possessed' to talk to a manager and tell them about the company and how we could help them with the excellent service our company offers to every customer.

"I have been able to grow with the company in my job. I started as a dispatcher/collections. Management helped me grow by seeing my potential for sales and customer relations. I am now the head of accounts receivable, but I have also added sales, customer relations and new construction management to my job description.

"The owners are always there for the employees. Whether it's a family emergency or a personal financial crisis, they always reach out to lend a hand. The one thing that is prominent in my mind was when my granddaughter was very ill and taken to a children's hospital. It was a Sunday when I called the owners, who were at

their daughter's house for a barbeque. Rick and Patty came right over to our home to show their concern and help reassure me that everything would be OK. They were there for me the entire time and I am very grateful.

"I could go on and on about their generosity and kindness toward everyone here. For instance, we have dinners catered once a quarter to celebrate our team success and we play fun games for cash prizes. There are roller skating parties for the families and other outings to keep all the families involved. It's not only the employees that enjoy this; the owners love to see everyone together with their families, relaxing and having a great time.

"Black Diamond has truly made this 'dream' of working for a company that truly appreciates its employees a reality."

— **Pat Drouillard,** *accounts receivable and sales*

"I have only been with Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical for about five months and it feels like forever, but in a good way. The employees and employers at Black Diamond have an excellent way of taking new employees under their wings and making them feel like family. At Black Diamond Plumbing, there is a constant team effort. Anyone who steps into the 'Black Diamond World' can feel this closeness. Employee appreciation seeps out of everyone here. Those who see it, want to be, without a doubt, part of it.

"Frank Lloyd Wright said, 'I know the price of success: dedication, hard work, and an unremitting devotion to the things you want to see happen.' Black Diamond has a similar idea on work. We 'Strive for Flawless Service.' In order for us as a company, as well as individually, to be successful, we put much dedication and hard work into every one of our jobs. We are devoted to what we do and we want to do it well.

"I never thought that I would end up in the trades. Well, technically I'm not out in the field, but you get the point. I had always pictured myself in the corporate world in a high-rise building. Little did I know that I would stumble upon a job in which I look forward

to staying and growing along with the company. I admire the company and all that has to go along with it — from the people to the principles. We all have the same goals here — to work hard and grow into a success together.

"Plumbing was something I never envisioned as a career but now, being in that line of work, I agree with the saying from John W. Gardner, 'The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because philosophy is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.'"

— **Brittany Novak,**
administrative assistant/dispatcher

"After working for 43 years in the plumbing business, I decided to end my working career (when the time comes) on a high note. Black Diamond is an extremely high note. When the time comes — go out on top. A few reasons why I believe this are the high quality of equipment and technology to perform work more efficiently; the friendly atmosphere created first by the owners and carried out by the entire staff; the open-door policy for any matters, big and small; the support system offered in all areas of the company; management is always willing to listen and adjust for the benefit of all employees; the word 'boss' does not exist — we are all just one team working for the common good of all employees and customers; and finally, Black Diamond is more of a family than a place of employment."

— **Joe Pienschke,** *new construction coordinator*

"My experience with Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical began when the company was first established. I was brought into the plumbing world at a young age and have always been fascinated with the world of plumbing. After all, my father was a dedicated plumber for as long as I can remember and was also the visionary for Black Diamond. After college, I went off to work for a banking firm, believing that

I would find happiness in the corporate world. After four long years, I realized it was not a healthy environment for me. It became a 'job' rather than a career that I was passionate about.

"In joining Black Diamond, I was immediately welcomed with open arms into the Black Diamond family. Some would say it was an easy transition seeing as my parents and brother-in-law were running the operations, but each employee showed a great deal of enthusiasm upon my arrival. I truly gained a second family. Each day I love walking in the door each morning to see what awaits me, from bills to customer service to employee appreciation.

"I have always known my family was generous with the employees at Black Diamond, but I never really knew how generous until I worked in the corporate world. Black Diamond management puts the same dedication and commitment into celebrating its employees as it expects on each job performed. We organize appreciation events and holiday parties which include all employees and their families. Each employee is recognized for his or her talents and rewarded for his or her efforts throughout the year. We also believe that without the support of the spouses and significant others, our employees could not perform their jobs effectively. Therefore, each spouse and significant other is recognized at company events as well.



Black Diamond has its own apprentice school, headed up by Joe Pienschke, as well as continuing education classes for journeymen plumbers. Pictured are Pienschke (left) and supervisor Archie Lamar, in the two-story training "house" built inside the shop facility.

"My position here is financial analyst, although my job description goes beyond the boundaries that most financial analysts have. My job description ranges from accounts payable to creative design and payroll to party planning. I work closely with management to create the quarterly company newsletter as well as coordinate our company functions, which allows me to explore my creative ideas and make them a reality for our employees and families to enjoy. Not many companies will give you the freedom to create and truly appreciate the time and effort in making those visions a reality.

"Like most others, I could go on for pages on the wonderful aspects of Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical.

I truly believe the company success is a direct reflection of the dedication and enthusiasm of each individual that forms the Black Diamond family. As a result, Black Diamond Plumbing & Mechanical fosters an atmosphere that allows each employee to become successful in their own careers and achieve great things. I know, at 26 years old, this is the place that I will retire."

— **Jaclyn Szymczak,**
financial analyst

To nominate an individual or company for the 2007 Best Contractor to Work For Contest, e-mail Managing Editor Kelly Faloon at faloonk@bnpmedia.com. Contest entry deadline is Sept. 1, 2007.

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