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Advanced Waste employees encouraged to innovate

By [Eric Decker](#), of BizTimes
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Innovation has played a major role in the continued growth of Advanced Waste Services Inc., a West Allis-based hauler and processor of industrial waste.

The company, started in 1992, saw its sales and revenues remain stable during the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. Last year, it had about 10 percent growth, and Mike Malatesta, the company's president, anticipates about 20 percent growth this year.

"We're hitting strides now that we may not have been able to hit before," he said.

Advanced Waste Services' growth has been fueled by its culture of innovation, Malatesta said. Instead of running ideas through a corporate structure, where changes need the approval of a board of directors, the company's employees are allowed to make changes as they see fit.

"Innovation doesn't come out of my brain," Malatesta said. "The way I see my job is to make sure that we have a belief system that supports our growth and be better than anyone else."

The company has facilities in Milwaukee, Illinois, Indiana and Pennsylvania. The general managers who run those facilities are responsible for their performance, but are free to change or improve operations as they need to, Malatesta said.

"It's up to them to make sure that what we've agreed to is actually what happens in the day-to-day operations of the company," he said. "Each of our plant managers answers to the market GM, but they have a lot of autonomy to make improvements to increase productivity and quality. The only thing we're rigid on is capital purchases, but everything else they're free to do as long as compliance is met."

That culture which encourages employees to make changes that they think will better serve customers or improve operations, has led to Advanced Waste Services' continued improvement. While it is not a perfect system, Malatesta said the company believes it needs to allow its employees to experiment and occasionally make mistakes.

"The culture has been trying to do things better and try some ideas we haven't done before," he said. "(We want them to ask) if it works out well, OK, but if not, what's the harm going to be? If the harm is inconsequential, let's try it."

The company tells its employees that are in the field and have the most contact with customers that their feedback is critical because of that close contact.

"We depend on our folks in the field that sell and deliver to tell us how we need to position our solutions to do the best," Malatesta said. "The only time I get involved is when someone says, 'No. We can't do that.'"

An important component of the company's culture of innovation is also sharing financial data with all employees, Malatesta said. Advanced Waste Systems uses a software system that ties its financial, accounting, sales, operations, maintenance and other components together, which also allows all employees to see how the company is operating relative to its sales, production and operational goals for the year.

"You can always see where the money is being spent, where it's being made, how we're doing on production, collections and our sales pipeline," Malatesta said. "If you don't know the impact of what you're doing, it's hard to be concerned about it. If you give people transparency about what they're doing, then they can do a better job."

About Eric Decker

Eric Decker is a reporter with BizTimes Milwaukee, covering banking and finance, mergers and acquisitions, private equity investment, manufacturing and related fields. Eric is a 1998 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Contact Eric by emailing him (contact information below). News can also be sent to Eric Decker, BizTimes Milwaukee, 126 N. Jefferson St., Ste. 403, Milwaukee WI 53202.

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