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*—Rakini Chinery, AAF, AzMF*



# Boost Your Squad

How floral industry members  
are tackling labor issues and  
keeping morale high

**F**arai Madziva, vice president of sales and chief of staff at Kitayama Brothers Farms in Watsonville, California, has wrestled for years with a problem that will sound familiar to any floral industry business owner and manager: how to *find* high-quality team members — and then how to make them want to *stay*. Working for a flower farm is invigorating and rewarding — Madziva, a member of the Society of American Florists' Growers Council, knows that firsthand. It's also demanding and challenging. The work requires problem-solving skills, strategic thinking, and a detail-oriented yet flexible mind. Madziva had a hunch that many prospective employees didn't even have the floral industry on their radar.

Fortunately, Madziva likes a challenge.

He started to brainstorm new ways to find, recruit and onboard employees onto Kitayama Brothers' management track. He reached out to nearby universities, including the University of California, Berkeley, along with UC Davis and UC Santa Barbara. His goal: Create a cluster of full-time employees with a mandate to come in to Kitayama Brothers and learn everything they could across all departments, supported by a three-year training program that would give them real-world experience and a clear path at the longtime flower grower. When he talked with career development offices at the universities, Madziva was specific about the personality traits he was after, but he was open to any academic background. After all, he figured, everyone in the floral industry wears multiple hats and needs diverse skills. Plus, Madziva saw bringing in new voices and perspectives as part of his mandate as a leader.

"If we want to change the floral industry to suit the modern way of doing things, and to appeal more to Millennials' and Gen Z's talent, we have to change our own capabilities and approaches," he said. "You can't expect people to be trained. You have to develop them."

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### Labor Headaches

Building a reliable workforce has never been easy in the floral industry, for reasons large and small, old and new. Floral businesses compete against higher-paying industries and work through an often-dysfunctional immigration system. Prospects who apply for a job because they have a dreamy vision of working with flowers are turned off by tasks that are hard and physical.

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—Farai Madziva, Kitayama Brothers



**ELLA ARNERICH**  
Kitayama Brothers

The pandemic added new hurdles, too: Employees (and owners) contending with virtual school and increased caretaking at home, along with worries about COVID — how to keep staff safe *and* how to staff when people are exposed and must quarantine. Member surveys conducted throughout the last year by SAF have shown again and again that staffing concerns are a challenge that keeps owners up at night, and a factor that prevents greater success. (“If I’d had more staff, I could have made more sales,” has been a common COVID-era reaction to holiday results.)

There aren’t easy answers to these labor issues, but there are floral business owners and managers tinkering and experimenting to find specific solutions, including ways to do more with less. Ahead of Mother’s Day and a busy spring season, we talked to some of them about the tactics that are helping to build a more reliable workforce, along with ideas on how to keep morale and productivity high.

### Start Strong

In a busy industry, onboarding can be an afterthought, but skipping over that crucial step is a mistake. A 2018 survey conducted by The Harris Poll for CareerBuilder and SilkRoad found that 93 percent of employers agree that “a good onboarding experience is critical

to influence a new hire’s decision to stay with the organization.” Meanwhile 29 percent of employees said their organization didn’t do the right things in onboarding to “help them prepare and begin their new role.” (Nearly one in 10 reported leaving a company because of a negative onboarding experience.)

Madziva wasn’t looking for warm bodies but future leaders, which is why he came up with customized roadmaps for the three members of Kitayama Brothers’ inaugural Management Trainee Program, Ella Arnerich, Angela Carrera and Min Hwan Heo, who joined the company in June 2020.

“Cross-training is so important, but it takes time,” Madziva said, adding that he specifically designed the program on a three-year schedule to ensure trainees have the opportunity to experience different departments and several crop (and holiday production) cycles. “I also figured — if they stay here for three years, that says something about them being a right fit for us and us being a right fit for them.”

Madziva has done his best to help ensure the trio not only stays but shines in the program by acting as a mentor and coach himself. He meets weekly with each of the trainee program members, which is a big change from how new employees and interns used to acclimate to the company culture. “Before, [new hires] might be thrown in and left alone,” he said. Instead, Madziva works regularly with Arnerich, Carrera and Heo on measurable goals and key performance indicators, shaping and adjusting their workload to better reflect their interests and Kitayama Brothers’ needs.

“When I started to brainstorm the Management Trainee Program, we didn’t have the budget for it, and I was kind of pushing it [on people],” Madziva said. “Now everyone here wants to grow the program, and [the current trainees] are getting pulled into all kinds of new projects. They’ve already proven their value just by bringing new ideas and asking ‘outsider’ questions about processes, like ‘Why *do* we do it this way — could we try it like this?’”



**TALENT TIP:** Don’t have the resources to create a management training program? Start small.



**ANGELA CARRERA**  
Kitayama Brothers



**MIN HWAN HEO**  
Kitayama Brothers



**MARTHA AARON, AIFD**  
Sedona Mountain High Flowers

At Sedona Mountain High Flowers in Sedona, Arizona, Martha Aaron, AIFD, has used the pandemic period to improve her hiring practices and informal onboarding. That includes asking more questions up front and opening a dialogue early on important issues that might divide her small team. In interviews, for example, she directly addresses COVID concerns, including the shop's policy on masked customers and employees, to ensure new hires will work well with her existing workforce.

"As an owner, I know I can't tell my employees what they can and cannot do outside of work," she said. "But we are a small family, and we are in tight quarters. I encourage and remind my staff to keep their circles small. Who they see, we all see. I ask questions of new candidates to make sure they [too] are like-minded and responsible."

### Help People Grow

For Arnerich, a graduate of UC Santa Barbara with a degree in environmental studies, a strong pull of the program was the chance to learn and grow — and to see a future for herself in the industry. "After speaking with [Madziva], I knew that this program would give me experience in all areas of farm management," explained Arnerich, who at press time was working alongside fellow trainee Heo to refine the company's standard operating procedures. "I could not pass up such an incredible learning opportunity."

Carrera, who is bilingual, agreed. "I am proud of being one of the first links between production, sales, leadership, and our greenhouse employees," said Carrera, who graduated from UC Davis

with a degree in environmental science and management. "It makes me happy to be able to remove the language barrier and provide insight to both sides that wasn't as possible before."

When you help employees see those future roles for themselves at your business, they're less likely to leave and more inclined to feel invested in the business, said SAF Next Gen Taskforce member Tyler Meskers of Oregon Flowers in Aurora, Oregon, who pointed out that recruiting new team members is always a goal, but cultivating talent from your existing workforce can be lower hanging fruit. "I like to hire from within and allow employees to grow within the business," Meskers explained.

**"The unknown risk of what tomorrow will bring remains the biggest challenge. That's what keeps me up at night."**

*—Tyler Meskers, Oregon Flowers*

One example: Luis Garcia, Oregon Flowers' packing manager, started in an entry-level position seven years ago. Today, Garcia leads the packing warehouse, oversees a seven-person crew — and has become an example to other employees looking to move up the ranks, Meskers said. "Luis showed potential within the first few days at work, coming from a labor contractor, and proves [to other employees that] Oregon Flowers provides opportunity, pay increases, bonuses, and growth if you show a strong work ethic," Meskers added.

Helping people grow can also mean seeing them in a new light, according to SAF Retailers Council member Rakini Chinery, AAF, AzMF, of Allan's Flowers in Prescott, Arizona. When her longtime



### TRAIN YOUR TEAM

Did you know that the Society of American Florists has a new resource for training and empowering floral industry teams? SAF's Career Connections is a hub of high-quality, targeted industry information and education on the topics you and your team need most now. Find out more and explore this exciting new tool for growing and improving your business at [safnow.org](https://safnow.org).

manager decided not to return to the business after having a baby, Chinery initially panicked as she was “forced to rethink everything.” She took stock — of the situation and her team — and realized she needed to ask for help. “There was no way for me to do it all, so I had to go to my team,” she said. “I thought about what each of them was particularly good at and basically began to offer them the opportunity to take on more work and responsibility.”

The approach paid off, with employees feeling more empowered and challenged — and more team members learning about the business across departments, rather than in silos. When Chinery checked in with her team shortly after the change in workflows took effect, “The overall consensus was that the team was functioning better than it ever had,” she said. “People were learning how to do things, how to engage brides, corporate clients, fix technical issues, and help each other be better.”



**RAKINI CHINERY, AAF, AZMF**  
Allan's Flowers

in the floral industry], but now others are on to our secret.”

In an SAF virtual event ahead of Valentine’s Day, financial pro and Floral Management columnist Paul Goodman, MBA, PFCI, shared similar insight on finding drivers for busy holiday seasons, including Mother’s Day. This year’s planning could be complicated by a surge in restaurant need for delivery drivers, but there are other tried-and-true places to look — people florists too often overlook, Goodman advised. “There are a lot of people out there who would never ever think about delivering flowers, but their church is going on a mission trip or their kid’s band is raising money, so they might be interested,” he said. “Offer to pay them, say, \$5 per delivery for their fundraising cause. Many people will come out for that.” (Find Goodman’s session at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).)



**TALENT TIP:** Help people grow? What if you can’t find people to work, period?

**“I feel a little assurance that we are still here, and we have survived up until this point. We have weathered this unplanned storm just by being true to who we are and what we do.”**

—*Staci Bryant, Expressions Unlimited*

That’s the situation Staci Bryant of Expressions Unlimited in Greenville, South Carolina, has found herself in lately. “It was that way before the pandemic, but more so now,” she said. At the same time, she’s noticed that the pandemic has forced some potential hires to “think about what they really want.” People who might not have considered working in the floral industry before the crisis now view the chance to work with nature in an industry that facilitates warm feelings and connections more favorably. “Some of them want to come learn and enjoy what our industry provides,” she said. “That is the refreshing part of all of this. We knew all along the rewards [of working

### Communicate Clearly

One of the biggest pandemic headaches for Meskers? All of the uncertainty the crisis has created, which can be frustrating and confusing for both management and employees.

It’s important that team members trust their employers to share information as they have it and to keep the company focused. At the start of the pandemic, for example, Oregon Flowers instituted weekly meetings to review safety protocols and share updates. (They’ve since scaled those back to monthly sessions.) They also created an “exposure risk manual,” which details processes and procedures in the event of positive cases within the business. “COVID-19 throws a wrench into every day,” Meskers said, adding that it can

feel like a full-time job just for owners to stay updated on restrictions and the latest news. "The unknown risk of what tomorrow will bring remains the biggest challenge. That's what keeps me up at night."

In Arizona, Aaron and the Sedona Mountain High Flowers team also take a proactive approach to communication. "We live in a tourist town and the [fall] holidays brought high [virus] numbers back to our town," she said. "At the beginning of the new year, as a team, we decided that for pretty much the entire year of 2021 we wanted to be extra safe and close off the showroom to its now limited size." To make the change more sustainable for the business, Aaron is investing in a smaller cooler for the reduced showroom space and additional gift items, to make the retail area "more interesting and comfortable for our clients."

"My employees are very happy about this change and feel more protected than when we had clients roaming the whole store," she said. "It also allows us a better chance to keep up our cleaning protocols."

 **TALENT TIP:** The pandemic has forced many industry businesses to experiment with new ways of doing business — and while that experimentation can be a boon, all the pivoting can leave an already overwhelmed staff dizzy. HR expert Glenna Hecht of Humanistic Consulting — and a frequent contributor to *Floral Management* — has since the start of the pandemic encouraged business owners to embrace "intro" and "outro" messages to staff: "Here's what I know today..." and "I'll let you know if anything changes." The approach prioritizes communication while also signaling to the staff that owners are vulnerable now, too — because plans can change.

In November, as COVID cases in the Northeast began to rise, Studley's in Rochester, New Hampshire, instituted pod-style scheduling, to reduce risks among team members. "It helped because we did have an exposure, so only half the staff was affected," said Molly Meulenbroek, a co-owner with her husband, Jeffrey, and brother-in-law, David. "But it also took its toll

and meant more work for people who weren't exposed." By mid-January, the business had switched back to its former scheduling system — to everyone's relief, Meulenbroek said. "Coming back to [non-pod] schedules and full staff, we feel more like we know what's going on, on a day-to-day basis," she explained. "There's just more continuity." 🌿



**Mary Westbrook** is the editor in chief of *Floral Management* magazine.

**MOLLY MEULENBROEK**  
Studley's

# Cheer + Lead

Supporting staff, helping them grow and communicating well are all important components of leadership but don't forget to tend to your own needs, too. Burnout risk reached a two-year high in August 2020, according to workforce engagement surveys conducted by LinkedIn's Glint Platform. Employees and owners are both susceptible to losing steam and becoming run down, so it's important for leaders to model good habits for recharging.

In Sedona, Arizona, Martha Aaron, AIFD, has become more mindful of protecting her own downtime, away from Sedona Mountain High Flowers. "I come in an hour early and leave with or after everyone daily, but I make sure I get my one day off during the week and I'm trying to push to leave around 4 p.m. when I can and finish my paperwork and emails at home," Aaron said. "Making time to do office work at home, spending more time at home with my family has really helped me relax in the evenings and feel like I have more time with my husband."

Staci Bryant of Expressions Unlimited in Greenville, South Carolina, said — while there's still stress and worry to spare right now — she's leading her team into the 2021 spring holidays with less fear than she had in 2020, at the start of the pandemic. "With the bottom falling out the way it did [last year], I learned a lesson: No matter how well prepared you feel, you're never quite as prepared as you think you are," Bryant said. "So now, after going through this whole thing and continuing to go through the unknowns, I feel a little assurance that we are still here, and we have survived up until this point. We have weathered this unplanned storm just by being true to who we are and what we do. I have a great group of people that work along with me to help this ship sail. The seas may get rocky, but smoother seas will come."

-M.W.