



A CULTure of success

With the help of Saratoga Boatworks' newly formed mission statement, the dealership is taking the high road of continuous improvement.

Jeff Olson is frugal.

When I visited the dealership in late March, the owner of upstate New York-based Saratoga Boatworks explained it simply: He'd rather invest in improvements with a direct impact on the company's bottom line than the aesthetics of his three locations.

It's no surprise then that Olson says the conference room – not the showroom – is the most important feature of his new Queensbury, N.Y., dealership location. The room itself is nothing fancy. Just a long table with chairs and a dry erase board. But what's discussed within its walls are at the heart of the dealership's success and key to its future.

Some of the initiatives born in employee meetings there are small. Every month, Olson asks his staff to bring business improvement ideas to the table. The person with the "Best Idea" wins \$100 in cash.

The most recent "Best Idea" was thought up by DonnaLee Mero, the dealership's manager of accounting and administration. Like many dealerships, the company's Saratoga showroom features an oversized garage door to allow boats to be driven in and out. And when it was open, it allowed either the warm air in the winter or the cool air in the summer to escape, kicking the heating and cooling system into overdrive. This was a significant waste that cost the dealership real money.

Mero suggested installing a switch along the door's track that would turn off the heating and cooling system when the door was opened and turn it back on when it was closed. She explained that one of the things that she appreciates most about Olson's management style is that he asks for employee feedback.

Mission: Improvement

Other initiatives discussed in the conference room are large. Most recently, the crew completed Saratoga Boatworks' new mission statement: "We provide the means to enjoy a lifestyle of adventure and fun on the water by delivering the 'worry-free' boating experience." Olson sought help when working on it in the form of a Total Management 2 Workshop, offered by Spader Business Management [For more on TM2, please see "Culture Counts" on p. 40]. He showed me his notes from the course as we sat at the conference room table.

But the owner isn't the only one at Saratoga Boatworks seeking improvement. In fact, the Queensbury sales manager, Michael Niemczura, who boasts 18 years in the boating business, said part of what makes Saratoga Boatworks stand out among his past employers is Olson's willingness to go to almost any lengths to help his employees. That includes matching them up with specific books from his dealership library that he believes will help them grow and improve, both personally and professionally.

One employee is reading "Up Your Business!: 7 Steps to Fix, Build, or Stretch Your Organization" by Dave Anderson, another is reading "The Millionaire Next Door," and a third is in the middle of "Think like a Champion: Building Success One Victory at a Time," by Denver Broncos coach Mike Shanahan. Another aspect Niemczura said he enjoys about working for Olson is the structure and vision he provides employees.

"Working here is almost like joining a cult," commented Olson. "We're one team moving in the same direction toward the same goal. We're trying to

Dealership name: Saratoga Boatworks, Inc.

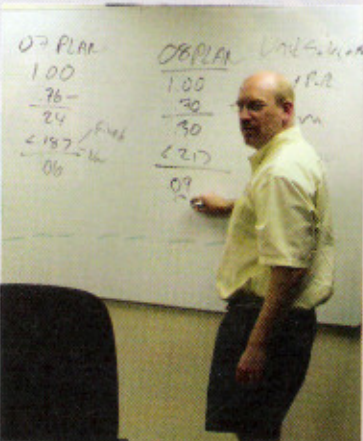
Location: Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Number of locations: 3

Number of full-time employees: 26

Boat and engine brands: Baja, Crownline, Stingray, Sweetwater, Aqua Patio, San Pan, PolarKraft, Mercruiser, Volvo, Honda, Mercury

Of particular interest: The dealership has the highest pre-owned boat margins in its Spader 20 Group, according to owner Jeff Olson. The key to its success? Buying "right" at 80 percent of wholesale NADA value for boats less than 5 years old, he says.



The mission statement developed by Jeff Olson, above, and his team around Saratoga Boatworks' conference table is now being incorporated into its marketing materials.

be perfect every day. We're not perfect, but we're getting there."

In fact, Olson's goal is to turn Saratoga Boatworks – ranked No. 54 on *Boating Industry's* Top 100 Dealers list – into a top 25 dealership. No doubt the strategies for getting there will be discussed around that conference room table. – BY LIZ WALZ