Paul Polito loves a challenge. In fact, the more difficult a task, the more likely he is to embrace it. “Any time you are tested, you learn a lot,” he says. “It’s what separates you from the competition.” This philosophy led him to become a paving contractor in the first place — he says, because paving is difficult to do well, the reward for a job well done is greater.

Polito didn’t start his career in paving, however. He took his first construction job right out of high school, at the age of 18. “Construction was the only job I could find,” he says. “I had to eat.” He soon found he liked it. He worked for a concrete company for seven years doing a variety of jobs, and then took a position with Granite Construction where he rose to assistant plant manager.

In 1996, Polito formed Tucson Asphalt Contractors with no employees and no equipment. “I started with literally nothing but a 5-gallon bucket,” he says. “I put flyers on mailboxes, but the only person who called was a lady who yelled at me because the tape I used took the paint off her mailbox.” Working with no equipment wasn’t easy, either. Polito says he’d sell several patches, and then rent a dump truck to do the work. After two years of patching and seal coating driveways, he finally bought a used paver.

Today, Tucson Asphalt Contractors has 40 employees and an annual volume of $7.4 million on jobs including commercial and municipal asphalt and concrete projects — the company’s
largest project to date is a $3 million, 22-acre shopping center site package that included everything from clearing the site to striping the pavement. The company's present size suits Polito, who prefers steady expansion to explosive growth.

With respect to Polito's management style, a number other than annual revenues may be more telling -- he's given out approximately $400,000 in bonuses to his employees. He puts a high value on his employees, not just because of the fierce competition in the Tucson area, but because he feels it's the right thing to do. “If you treat your employees well, everything else flows from there,” he says. “Turnover tells you a lot about a company.” His attitude pays off -- many of his employees are long-term. When Polito needs to hire employees, he finds them primarily through word-of-mouth.

In addition to the bonuses, Polito gives his employees a 401k match, health insurance and vacation -- and after five years with the company employees can elect to take the cash equivalent of their vacation time. Polito also hosts employee picnics, Christmas parties and often brings in lunches for the crew. One of the most important tenets of the company's philosophy is a strong commitment to safety. The company has a comprehensive drug testing program and provides both on- and off-the-job training. Polito holds weekly safety meetings and has a monthly independent safety audit.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS
Like many companies, Tucson Asphalt Contractors made some early mistakes, including a lane redo that cost the company about $75,000, but this taught Polito valuable lessons. “We messed up,” he says. “We had to mill it, then repave and restripe it.” Another frustrating situation occurred when one of the company's estimators passed away midway through work on a big project, leaving a mystery behind for Polito to solve. “It took awhile to figure out exactly how he estimated the project,” he says. Polito now has four full-time estimators -- David Trejo, Tom Petitti, Raymon Vazquez and David Tyrvac.

Polito's crews perform a considerable amount of paving for other contractors, with quality as the number one priority, but Tucson Asphalt Contractors remains the only small paving company in the area with a construction division.

Learning from issues as he deals with them, Polito says going above and beyond the customer's expectations is the company's goal. He sends out comment cards on every job, and stresses the importance of quality to his employees. “It's getting everyone to understand the big picture,” he says. “We do a lot of mentoring and coaching.” Polito's efforts to invest in his employees are evident to his clients, as well. Tom Bartels, the transportation superintendent for the City of Tucson, has known Polito for 30 years and says he is committed to honesty. “I once saw a document he distributed to his employees,” he says. “It discussed the importance of integrity and protecting the company's reputation.”

“SMART” ASPHALT
Since 2005, Tucson Asphalt Contractors has offered Smart Asphalt, a rubberized asphaltic concrete made from asphalt cement, reclaimed tire rubber.
and additives and polymers, to the private sector. Used for many years by municipalities, rubberized asphalt was too expensive for private use. Now, Polito uses Smart Asphalt for commercial and private parking lots and driveways, in addition to projects for governmental agencies. “It’s 10-to-1 better than regular asphalt,” he says. “The rubber overlay heals itself. The surface also cuts traffic noise by approximately 50 percent.”

SMOOTH OPERATION
Although it took Polito two years to buy his first paver, he hasn’t wasted time acquiring equipment since. Tucson Asphalt Contractors now has seven backhoe loaders, five rollers, four pavers, 20 trailers and 27 trucks, plus dozens of pieces of light equipment. Two full-time mechanics with overlapping shifts perform preventive maintenance when the equipment comes in every evening, while warranty work and oil analysis are left to the dealer. Polito has a high degree of dealer loyalty. “It’s extremely important, because if you’re loyal, they’ll take care of you,” he says. “There are a lot of nickel-and-dimers out there you don’t want to have to deal with.”

The goal of exceeding expectations extends to the yard and shop, both of which are neatly maintained, says Tom Trimmer, material sales representative for CPC Southwest, a company Polito has purchased asphalt from for 12 years. “I give them kudos,” Trimmer says. “Their yard is one of the better looking yards in Tucson.”

Polito’s purchasing strategy is to buy a combination of new and used equipment, taking advantage of good deals and attractive financing options. He buys most pavers new, but prefers to purchase used trucks. “I’d rather someone else take the hit, and then I’ll buy it for 10 cents on the dollar,” he says. He’s happy with his present fleet size; however, he says he’d like to add three rollers and update some of his trucks in the near future. Polito is a smart equipment manager, says Diane Riegers of Kety Leavitt, the company’s bonding agent. “They’re excellent with both the maintenance and replacement of their equipment,” she says.

WHAT’S NEXT?
Although Polito says he’d like to explore specialty trades such as color coating in the future, he’s happy with the growth of his company, and is more concerned with making a difference in his employees’ and clients’ lives. “Humans are born selfish,” he says. “The test of our lives in the modern world is how we overcome that selfishness. A life without contribution is a life without circumstance.”

An operator prepares a drive for paving at Omni Tucson National Resort and Spa, a project Tucson Asphalt Contractors worked on for Omni International and Lloyd Construction General Contractors.