

Keys to being a well-rounded manager

SUPERINTENDENTS SHOULD WORK ON NONAGRONOMIC ASPECTS OF THEIR JOBS TO BECOME MORE BUSINESS SAVVY

written by Steve and Suz Trusty / reprinted with the permission of Golf Course News, May 2006

Face it. Today's Golf Course Superintendent is a business professional. Though demands for premium conditions on golf courses are escalating, more Superintendents' time is focused on the business aspect of facility operations. It's no longer enough to have a sound agronomic background and excellent skills in all turf and grounds related aspects of golf course management.

Looking at employment postings, well rounded is the description often given by those seeking Superintendents. If Superintendents haven't brushed up on their business skills lately, they're probably falling behind. How many new products and types of equipment are they seeing daily? Technology moves as fast in the green industry as it does in the business world.

Know what you don't know

The first step to become more business savvy is a hard-hitting, honest assessment of one's skill levels. Many employers expect golf course Superintendent's to have an almost complete set of skills, according to Tommy D. Witt, CGCS, director of golf operations for Northmoor Country Club in Highland Park, Ill.

"It extends far beyond developing an effective course management program and hiring, and training supervising personnel," Witt says. "Today's Superintendent is expected to be competent at writing proposals, developing spreadsheets, monitoring inventories, developing and delivering PowerPoint presentations, addressing committees, interacting with members and other golfers, educating green committees/employers, and working with the media and the public. Our jobs cover the whole matrix of communication skills, people skills and financial management – and that might only be the beginning of the expertise required."

In which of these business practices are one's skills sufficient to allow him to hold his own in a meeting, committee or on-on-one situation? In what areas could he use a little or a lot more expertise? How can he gain it?

"There's so much about the position of superintendent you can't teach in the classroom," says Cleve Cleveland, CGCS, owner of Newark Valley (N.Y.) Golf Club. I'd classify it as 90 experience and 10 percent education. Agronomic ally, every golf course is different in terms of conditions, grasses, microclimates and dozens of other variables.

Many of the business aspects involved will also vary with each position. The broader the experience Superintendents gain in the areas of business management, the more effective they can be for their courses."

There are two basics concepts that relate to all aspects of the Golf Course Superintendents' position, according to Richard N. Eide, CGCS, principal of Golf Club Consulting in Glenwood Springs, Colo.

"First, think like the person you're serving, and second, use common sense," Eide says. "What we do is complex, but it's not brain surgery. We can have good success if we build on the fundamentals and use common sense."

Like a bean counter

Superintendents often manage the biggest budget within a golf course operation, so strong financial skills are essential. Yet, most Superintendents start their first job with little background in this area. Because of Cleveland's expertise in golf course and financial management (he's a certified public accountant), his seminars about the financial skills superintendents need are a good resource.

"Superintendent's without previous background in accounting should take a basic college-level principles of accounting course, pick up a good book such as Accounting for Dummies," or tap into GCSAA's financial seminars," he says. "Basic accounting will help them prepare a budget, that's ore consistent year to year, so they're likely to have it approved rather than wrangling over line items. They'll be better able to red a financial statement and understand why it doesn't match their budget figures."

There are many areas where financially savvy superintendents can allocate their budget budgets better and contribute to the bottom line.

"Superintendents need to be aware of what hidden costs figure into their labor budgets," Cleveland says. "The employee's salary is just part of the picture. If employees work more than 1,000 hours per year, they must be included in the course's benefits package. All related taxes and benefits will need to be factored into the true cost of each employee." Superintendents also should understand leases and why a capital lease is different than an operating lease. They should be able to compare lease options to purchase

options, choose the option that's the most beneficial to the course and explain why that decision was made.

Building blocks

Communication skills and people skills are significant building blocks for all aspects of management, and Superintendents should be able to communicate effectively, in speech and writing, to build relationships and get along with people. These elements come together when special projects, such as building new facilities or renovating existing ones, are involved. Superintendents can easily spend 60 percent to 75 percent of their time on the business aspects of these type projects.

Recently, Witt went through a renovation that involved much of this time the past three years. His responsibilities included formulating budgets, proposals and various mediums detailing issues, challenges and need for undertaking a major course renovation. He met with the city council, zoning board of appeal and design review commission. Witt also helped educate members about the renovation to prepare them to vote on it. That entailed explanatory tours of the golf course for members.

"I took photos of different areas on the course to document existing conditions," he says. "I prepared and delivered a series of PowerPoint presentation for five or six different groups of our membership, such as ladies, seniors and low handicappers. Each presentation focused on the issues of special interest to those groups. I also participated in town-hall meetings along with the golf course architect and green chairman."

Financially, Witt detailed the cost using a Band-Aid approach to problems on the course to the overall costs of the proposed renovations. He detailed how both approaches would affect on-going costs immediately and long term. He also provided comparison figures between leading and buying equipment.

Continually seeking new learning opportunities enables superintendents to develop the business savvy to handle projects such the one at Northmoor.

In the golf business, how one presents something can be as important as what's presented. No matter what their positions, superintendents should take the time to establish rapport and build relationships within an organization and with those they interact with in every facet of their work environment. It's especially important to establish relationships within the course management team.

"The higher the expectations of the golfer or member, the more imperative it is leadership at the facility is strong and all departments are able to work with each other to accomplish the goal of meeting the golfer expectations," Witt says. You can't do it with a 'me' attitude.

It has to be a team attitude that comes from building strong, healthy, secure, unencumbered relationships."

A good support system

A superintendent who has competent people working in his department allows him to focus his time on project development and other business aspects of his job responsibilities.

"It's a simple fact, you need a great staff to succeed," Witt says. "I try to hire and retain the best employees I can and reward them for superior performance. It's imperative the superintendent build a qualified staff. You not only need to hire good people, you also must develop an effective training program that equips them for their current positions and presents opportunities for them to advance within the organization. The more they succeed, the more I succeed. It's a win-win situation.

But finding the right people takes skill.

"When I assess potential employees, I want to see what they're accomplished in their previous positions and how dependable they're been," Cleveland says. "One of the most difficult things to evaluate is how a qualified individual is going to function on your staff under your management practices. A good human resources course or seminar can be beneficial to develop the people skills needed to make a new employee a good fit with your program. It's the personality of the individual and their desire to make it work."

A place in the market

People skills impact every facet of the superintendent's position and because golf is primarily a service business, superintendent's need to understand the client, know who they're targeting and figure out how to give them what they want, according to Eide.

"This is a highly competitive market," he says. "It's all about getting customers and then getting them to return."



Much of the marketing side of golf course management resolves around the playing surface, which is the basis of the Superintendent's job. Beautiful facilities with poor playing conditions won't earn return business.

"The facilities are going to be dramatically different from the public course to the high-end course, Eide says. "We're overbuilt in lots of areas, so your customer has many choices. You have to take a hard look at your course, define who you are, your potential buyer will be, and then focus on selling your product to that buyer."

It takes a well-rounded business professional to make that all work.