



# How to Keep YOUR JOB

Photos courtesy of Chris Carson

**A superintendent offers some time-honored tricks of the trade that can help you thrive as a professional golf course manager.**

**Chris Carson**

the resulting job notice specifying the need to “take the course to the next level.” This phrase has been the catalyst for many discussions among our peers, but not many people seem to grasp what these golf facilities are really saying or why the previous superintendent was removed.

As a member of the course relations committee of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of New Jersey, I have had many opportunities to interview and assist facilities hiring new superintendents. This has given me a better understanding of what golf facilities are seeking and why things sometimes go wrong for superintendents.

**A**ll too often we have seen colleagues lose their jobs and then read

### **Job security begins at home**

Most golfers never visit the maintenance facility, but obviously it's the place where every operation begins. I believe there is a strong connection between the condition of this facility and the condition of the golf course it serves. When the shop is neat and clean, when the equipment is well maintained, when the whole facility seems professionally run and cared for, it's almost certain the golf course will show the same care.

When a maintenance shop is a disaster area, the crew and golfers receive a strong message: Sloppiness, lack of concern and low standards are acceptable here and, therefore, also on the golf course.

Equipment, too, can tell a lot about the management philosophy of the superintendent. Machinery that is washed after use and properly maintained will perform more reliably and precisely and, as a result, last longer. Contrast that with a "rainy day" maintenance schedule, with a chemical sprayer caked with overspray or spills, with equipment that is put away covered with clippings and dirt, and you have a clear picture of an operation in need of management upgrading.

It really doesn't take a lot more money to do this part of your job well, but it does take commitment. When a small, poorly funded operation shows professionalism by being orderly and clean, the superintendent is more likely to get more of the space, equipment or money needed for his or her operation. If the golf facility management is convinced you are taking care of the resources you have, it will be more willing to support your budget requests.

### **A good foundation**

I recently visited a famous resort hotel in Virginia. While there, I met with the general manager, who told me his company had set as its prime goal the attainment of the "Five Diamond" award. After extensive review, they decided this goal could only be reached by improving the service orientation of the staff. The No. 1 focus was not on managers or chefs or executives, but on

doormen, parking valets and counter people. By training and appropriately paying the people who make the hotel's first impression, the company hoped to instill a cultural change that would improve the entire organization.

I observed these front-line employees, and the impression they made was wonderful. The hotel did achieve its goal, and I learned the valuable lesson that a service business is improved from the bottom of the employee pyramid upward.

It's a lesson that all of us in the golf service business should learn. For example, when your manager, green chairman or president calls business peers, he or she expects the call to be answered professionally and promptly. Does that person always receive the same telephone response when calling your office? Telephone etiquette is your first opportunity to make a good first impression, and it's too important to leave to chance. Good managers recognize this and teach their employees how to do it properly.

## **KEY POINTS**

- An orderly maintenance shop sends a clear message of care and professionalism that naturally extends to the care of the course.
- Good record keeping helps improve the efficiency of your operation, provides a record for your successor and tells management you care about the course's long-term value.
- It's critical for your job security to cultivate a professional working relationship with facility managers, especially the golf professional.
- It's important to set high standards and goals, but keep them realistic and in line with the needs of your specific course.

### **Good records are critical**

Next, take a look at your record keeping. Is it complete, with all pesticide applications, daily logs and weather information up to date?

Many superintendents take the extra step of tracking labor hours, watering schedules and similar records. But don't keep records just for the sake of having records. As long as these records serve a purpose and add value to the operation, they are appropriate. But I've also seen some operations waste a lot of time logging and tracking useless information.

In my case, I've assembled a management notebook that has proved useful over the years. Whenever I'm faced with a new situation or problem, I make brief notes on how it was handled, along with comments on the results obtained — good or bad. Photographs and literature are included, as are the pertinent comments of people from whom I sought help. This notebook is only about 150 pages, but it contains a valuable history of my course and my decisions. On many occasions reviewing these notes has helped me understand and solve recurring problems. It requires minimal time and also helps me order my thoughts by putting them down on paper.

In addition, this management notebook serves as a record of my successes and failures, so it should be extraordinarily valuable to my eventual successor. The management of my club is aware of this record, and I believe it illustrates how I have taken a long-range view with regard to management of the course — a view I believe is shared by them with respect to my employment.

### **It starts with people**

We all know our staffs are our No. 1 asset, so managers need to spend time tending to that asset. Building the maintenance staff can be difficult, but it's ultimately very rewarding. When your staff knows what to do because of your leadership and wants to do it because of their own enthusiasm and work ethic, you can make great strides on the golf course.

Enthusiasm is, in my mind, the most compelling feature I can find in an employee. Good managers are able to



Staff members are your most valuable assets. Utilizing their talents enhances their value to the club and your own value.

harness and direct that enthusiasm to the benefit of the operation but are rarely able to instill enthusiasm in employees who lack it.

Sometimes expanding enthusiasm is possible. At my club, with the help of

the golf professional, we outfitted every staff member with a set of used golf clubs. This simple and affordable idea allows my predominantly inner-city employees to play the game and, in fact, has turned some of them into golf



Encouraging staff members to play golf is a good way to improve awareness of the impact of course maintenance on the game.

fanatics. We have an annual staff golf event and encourage them to play when the course is closed. Playing time not only fosters their enthusiasm for the game but helps instill team spirit. A staff that understands and plays the game is more likely to appreciate the importance of careful maintenance.

#### **The ties that bind**

On an association level, GCSAA has recognized the need for cooperation within the golf world. I think it's entirely appropriate that our leadership is building ties with the PGA, the Club Managers Association of America, the USGA and other allies. We are all in the golf business together, and strong working ties and friendships can only help us all.

But on the golf facility level, I have seen too many instances of superintendents who manage their operation well, who develop excellent staffs and who grow good turfgrass but who also get into difficulty because they ignore the most important relationship at the course: the one between themselves and their managers and golf professionals.

It's remarkable that we superintendents don't realize how critical this relationship is. We have even heard tales of animosity and outright hatred toward pros, managers or even green chairmen. Strained relationships can only result in grief, and there is really no reason for it. A good superintendent works with, not against, these people. Certainly a green chairman, whose role is voluntary, doesn't have the time or inclination for an adversarial relationship with the superintendent.

Though friendship is the ideal, at the very least a professional relationship must be developed and maintained. Yes, this can be difficult in some cases, but it's absolutely critical for continued success in our business.

The golf professional may answer more questions about the course and its condition in a week than you might in an entire season. So it only makes sense for him or her to be an advocate of your program. Your pro's public relations skills and constant exposure to golfers can help soothe angry patrons and help explain why some of your maintenance practices, although temporarily annoying, are vital for the course.



Cultivating relationships with club managers and the board — for example, in arenas such as this association event—helps develop good professional teamwork.

For example, ask yourself what you would like your pro to say when an influential golfer comes steaming into the shop with questions about green aerification. The golf staff should know

why the course must be aerified and be able to explain it in a way that eases golfers' concerns.

Instead of offering cooperation and support, the pro could easily say, "I don't know why he's messing up the

greens during the season. I told him it was a mistake, but he just won't listen!" Those two sentences could do a world of damage; they should never be made and won't be made if you cultivate a good working relationship.

This works both ways, of course. I have seen superintendents ignore golfers' needs and the requests of the pro or manager simply because of a "power trip" or a bad relationship. Not cutting greens for a pro/assistant pro tournament, not doing everything possible to accommodate an important event, or watering a green when the pro staff has it surrounded with golf bags for a shotgun start are surefire ways of saying, "I don't care about you or your role in this operation."

#### **Listen to comments**

Every superintendent must learn what is important to his or her golfers. It is useless to focus on landscaping, wildlife protection or bunker maintenance if the green surfaces or house-

keeping are perceived as needing work. It's easy for us as course managers to concentrate resources in areas we believe are important, but good managers listen to golfers' concerns and, whenever possible, accommodate them.

It's hard for most of us to take complaints and criticism, but these comments give us clues on how to improve operations. Many times it means compromising, but that's what we do — we compromise between quality turf growth and quality golf course preparation. The successful course manager balances the needs of the course with the needs of golfers. The best managers also know, of course, when it's time to stand their ground, but they are always prepared to defend their stance with sound reasoning.

#### **Learn the language**

During my visits with directors of courses that are seeking to hire new superintendents or that are having difficulties with their current superintendents, I've noticed that real or perceived



An orderly shop and well-maintained equipment are usually mirrored in a well-maintained golf course.

lack of communication is frequently the main reason why superintendents get in trouble.

I know of an excellent, although extreme, example that occurred several years ago. The relations committee of our chapter was invited to a golf course by the superintendent to help him solve problems with the facility's owner. The

committee moderated a three-hour discussion. We always take a neutral tack in these instances; we don't necessarily act as advocates for our profession or the superintendent.

In this case, the owner, who was not a native speaker of English, was hesitant to criticize the superintendent. He believed he had hired a professional, and he respected him and his decisions. But all was not well. It was a course under construction, and naturally there were many decisions being made on the fly by the superintendent, while the owner couldn't understand why his suggestions were not being taken. In his mind, they were important things he wanted done right away. However, out of respect for his professional superintendent, he did not put them forward as dictates but rather as "suggestions."

The superintendent heard these suggestions and acted on them when he thought appropriate. In his mind, he was prioritizing correctly and appropri-

ately, and perhaps he was. But he ended up without a job because he didn't recognize that his owner's suggestions were high-priority items.

Although this example is based primarily on cultural differences, the lesson is still a valuable one: Learn the language! When your owner, manager or green chairman says he or she is not sure aerifying fairways one week before the club championship is a great idea, is

that person saying, "Don't do it" or "We'll see if it works out"? Or is he or she saying, "If we're going to do this, we had better communicate why. Let's not surprise anybody with this decision."

It certainly can be hard to know what owners, managers, committees, boards and golfers want, but the best managers make every effort to find out.

### **Set high goals**

We hear so often about "raising the

bar" as a metaphor for goal setting. In high school and college I was a high jumper on the track team. I used to set the bar higher while stretching and warming up, then drop it back down to a challenging but manageable height during practice. This gave me something to strive for, and it was an excellent motivational tool.

From my personal experience I know this works, and every successful superintendent I have met has high goals. Providing a vision of what the course can be is part of being a leader, and high goals provide us with an ideal target. Though these goals may be unattainable because of budget constraints or physical course conditions, they do provide a vision for the future. This vision can help you achieve success if you accept that success will not be measured by significant leaps but by small steps.

### **Be the leader at your course**

The superintendent who thrives is not content to stand still. He or she is always planning for improvement, setting goals and providing the golf facility with a plan and a vision of where it can be. From a management standpoint, this means the budget is well thought out, well presented and well defended. It means that a three- or five-year plan is in place, and that plan is constantly updated and improved.

Good managers review the quality of their operations periodically. They take a hard and honest look at every aspect of the operation.

Every year I try to eliminate an operation that isn't working, improve something we are doing and add something we haven't been doing. It's my way of challenging myself and the staff, and it forces me to review the successes and failures of the past season. When we open our minds to change, good things usually result.

### **The problem with perfectionism**

I began by addressing the negative message sent by sloppy maintenance facilities and careless procedures. Let's also consider a situation at the opposite end of the spectrum — an obsession with perfection.

Too many of our peers are striving for unattainable goals, and it leads to misery. By definition, a perfectionist can never be happy because it's simply not possible to be perfect. This basic fact has escaped the attention of too many superintendents who become overly stressed or burned out. They've lost the joy that attracted them to our profession, and in some cases job loss has resulted.

On the other hand, striving for excellence and making the course the best it can be each year are legitimate goals that help superintendents move forward. But remember, perfection is not a realistic or a reasonable goal.

### **Taking it to the "next level"**

When a golf facility's management says it wants to take the course to the "next level," that means the facility wants a superintendent who is a leader, who initiates programs appropriate to the course and who has high but realistic goals. That person must also be able

to recognize the needs of the staff, communicate well, manage the equipment and facility responsibly, and know how to reconcile the needs of the course with those of the golfers.

The people who thrive in our business recognize there is always something else to learn, always new programs to try, always new ways of looking at and improving their courses.

In simple terms, you want your owner or chairman to be able to walk through the clubhouse on Saturday morning and receive pats on the back for the quality of the course. Each one of those accolades translates into job security for you.

**GCM**

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### **2000 Leo Feser Award candidate**

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