Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!

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COMMUNICATE! Communicate! Communicate!" should be the motto, if not the rallying cry, of the successful green committee chairman, just as "Drainage! Drainage! Drainage!" are watchwords for the successful golf course superintendent.

The effective green chairman must interactively communicate with the superintendent, the membership, the officers, and the board of governors, as well as the club manager; the golf professional; regulatory and environmental agencies; the USGA and local golf jurisdictions; education, research, and extension services; and the local community. By networking in this way, the green chairman serves to interface the turf management efforts of these diverse participants.

What follows is an overview of how I perceive the green chairman fulfills his role as a communicator within this turf management complex.

- The chairman should extend an open invitation to all club members, male and female, no matter their handicap, to come forward with their questions or complaints. As a prerequisite, however, he must have an unbiased appreciation of how the golf course plays for all segments of the membership. He must be available, resilient to criticism, and deferential to praise, and he must patiently respond, especially to the complainers. So many golfers seem to be "born agronomists," with no reluctance to let the green chairman and others in on all their knowledge.

- The chairman should maintain regular written communication with the membership in the form of newsletters, special bulletins, progress reports, and the like. These communications should be educational as well as factual. For example, he should factually notify the members well in advance of the aerification schedule — be specific in detailing the progression of greens, tees, and fairways to be affected — covering all bases. Then, too, he should educationally discuss the need for aerification and coring, the benefits that derive, and what could result if neglected. Such communication will minimize grumbling and reinforce the appreciation of the members for the efforts of the superintendent and the committee.

- I suggest that because most members are more than just casually interested in the turf management of their golf course, a sociable dinner meeting on the subject would be well attended, preferably held early in the season. At this meeting, the green chairman can explain how the budget was derived and introduce the superintendent. The superintendent can then detail what has been accomplished on the course, what projects are in progress, and future plans for course improvements. New labor-saving or more efficient course grooming equipment acquisitions can be described. This can be followed by a question-and-answer period. USGA educational films also are available to supplement the program.

Subliminally, communication meetings of this kind serve to promote a friendlier and more comprehensive understanding by golfers of the golf course superintendent's role, their perception of his problems, and their appreciation of his contributions to their enjoyment of the game. Such meetings also provide golf members with a better understanding of the golf course on which they play and will heighten their concern for its tender loving care and feeding, just as they are concerned with their swing mechanics and the clubs and balls they use.

- The green chairman must, perforce, maintain a mutually respectful communication rapport with the superintendent. To nurture this rapport, he should educate himself on the basics of the maintenance cycle. He should make an effort to attend, with the superintendent's guidance, local, regional, and national turfgrass conferences. He should subscribe to the GCSAA's magazine Golf Course Management and to the USGA Green Section Record. In this way he can remain current and aware of the changes in the industry, e.g., water injection cultivation, subsurface placement of pesticides, growth regulators, triplex mowing, and the like, as such new techniques develop.
The informed green chairman can effectively assist the superintendent to help the membership accept and better understand why, for example, the maintenance program may oftentimes have to be directed more toward quality playing conditions than aesthetics. It could also be explained why, for instance, off-color green turf is just as playable, if need be, to cope with water shortages on one hand or with disease and playing problems, on the other hand, that can result from excessive watering in an attempt to sustain a deep green coloration. If only we would accept off-color green turf with-out complaint! As others have said, “Greener is not necessarily better,” and it bears repetition.

• The green chairman must maintain close communication with the board. Beyond their obvious budgeting responsibility to the board, the green chairman and the golf course superintendent have a moral commitment to the club not only to maintain the golf course, but to preserve its architectural integrity, its character, its essence. The chairman’s job does not give him license to rebuild the course as he sees fit or to condone such actions by the superintendent. All architectural changes should be approved by the board, such as changing the shape or size of putting greens, tee relocations, the removal or addition of trees, bunker modifications, and the like.

It can be good communication policy to have the superintendent periodically appear before the board of governors at their regular meetings, particularly when attempting to obtain board approval for a renovation project or for major equipment expenditures. In this way, board members can be assured that their questions have been fully, promptly, and satisfactorily addressed, while at the same time giving them the opportunity to reaffirm the competency of the superintendent, and the superintendent the opportunity to enhance his status.

• The lines of communication must be carefully maintained with the golf committee chairman. Tournament schedules are best planned around turf maintenance schedules and not vice versa, which is usually the case. While the golf course is there to accommodate member tournaments, with good communication the needs between maintenance and play can be compromised and, in the process, the course better nurtured to its ultimate potential.

From their intimate involvement with how the golf course plays from day to day, the golf chairman and the professional can alert the green chairman and the superintendent to how revisions in course preparation or maintenance could speed up play, eliminate backups, or alleviate a dangerous condition.

• When surveyed, golf course superintendents often include personnel/labor problems as one of their major maintenance problems. That is, for one reason or another, employees are not doing their job. Discontent may be justified in part by employer actions, and in part by employee actions. The green chairman can communicate by having the superintendent introduce the entire crew to the green committee, familiarizing the committee members with the crew’s names and jobs, and having refreshments available to create a social and friendly mood. Such recognition motivates workers to do a better job. Compliments, when in order, enable them to much more likely tolerate criticism for a subsequent mistake.

Because bad communication can kill productivity by the golf course maintenance crew, the green chairman can assist the superintendent, if need be. Poor management communication, not poor workers, is most often to blame for labor performance. The more immediate and candid the communication with workers, the stronger and more immediate will be their interest in improvement, and the lower the turnover rate. Lackadaisical workmanship and absenteeism, particularly, communicate back possible dissatisfaction with the conditions under which the crew must labor.

Reliably functioning working equipment and correctly applicable tools communicate the club’s concern for the work force, communicate back as job satisfaction by the work force, and ensure that our expensive equipment is in the hands of competent labor.

With equipment technology in the turf industry improving daily, our golf courses should be able to do more with fewer people, but it will mean that each workman be motivated by an enthusiasm that is generated at the top by club management and communicated down to the ranks with the help of the green chairman.

• There continues to be a high turnover rate among senior management at golf courses. Surprisingly, some clubs have lost general managers, superintendents, and golf professionals in mid-season. This turnover has been discussed at both manager and superintendent conferences, where better communication among staff, club management, and members has been proposed as the basic remedy. The green chairman is an important cog in any such remedial requirement for improved communication.

At my home club, Old Westbury, the superintendent, golf professional, and club manager get together at breakfast once a week for a relaxed discussion of needs,
programs, schedules, problems, or other matters of mutual interest.

- The club manager is also integral to the green chairman's communication process. The club manager completes the triad of responsibility, with the superintendent and golf professional, for the club's operation. It is through the manager that the green committee's responsibility for the maintenance of the clubhouse grounds, roadways, parking facilities, tennis courts, and other such peripheral areas can best be coordinated with the superintendent. Where he holds the title of general manager, he also oversees for the green committee regulatory compliance or other statutory requirements, administers payrolls and employee benefits, and assumes responsibility for the consistent execution of club policies.

- The communication responsibility of the green chairman can be well implemented by the participation of the USGA Green Section. Since 1920 it has served as an impartial, authoritative, and unmatched turf advisory agency. Its in-depth TAS reports are not only invaluable to the golf course superintendent, they also provide the green chairman with a reassuring and convincing public relations tool with members and help to conciliate members who disagree on proper maintenance practices.

Taking advantage of the USGA's Turf Advisory Service also can protect the club from an overzealous green committee or, perhaps, an equally ambitious superintendent.

- Effective communication includes an awareness of the Turfgrass Information Center — a private foundation initiated by the USGA and Michigan State University at East Lansing, Michigan. Access to the collection is through the Turfgrass Information File (TGIF), an on-line computerized bibliographic database. Some 23,000 records are now in the database, each representing a separate publication in turf culture. A turfgrass Thesaurus is available, identifying more than 13,000 key words to help search the database. You can call the Center or mail in a request for a subject search — or, on your own computer, you can search the database, which is available 18 hours per day, seven days per week at (517) 353-7209.

- Communication also means staying abreast of turfgrass and environmental research currently being heavily funded by the USGA with the support of the GCSAA. Many millions of dollars have been committed, and the spirited communication of the green chairman with the officers and the board of his club helps fuel the funding of these efforts.

- I am a consulting chemical engineer. There was a time 15 years or so ago when my chemical manufacturing clients were vowing very publicly to draw a line in the sand and not back away an inch from it, in their rapidly escalating confrontations with environmentalists and regulators. Dire predictions were made that the U.S. chemical industry would wither and possibly die if such a stand were not taken. Emotions were running high, but from the bitter experiences of Bhopal, Love Canal, dioxins, PCBs, and the like, chemical makers have learned to respectfully address such issues of substance by their critics.

As green chairmen we can learn from the chemical industry's experience. As the chemical industry was some 15 years ago, golf is now under unaccustomed attack after decades of public acceptance and support. We cannot respond as the chemical makers did then with a poorly conceived combination of denial, frustration, alarm, and confrontation. A far more dispassionate and communicative approach is needed and is being fostered by the leadership of the USGA and the GCSAA.

- I am from Long Island, New York, and recently the New York State Attorney General released a report with the doom-and-gloom title "Toxic Fairways: Risking Groundwater Contamination from Pesticides on Long Island Golf Courses." The report was greeted with concern by the golfing community, but not because it revealed any dangers to Long Island residents, golfers, or anything or anyone else. Rather, the report was inaccurate, unsupported by fact or data, and misleading.

Green chairmen can be effective watchdogs for the local community, helping to overcome such well-meaning but inaccurate and misleading reports and to emphasize the positive environmental impact golf courses have on our environment: how turfgrass prevents erosion, filters the air clean of pollutants, collects rainfall and snowmelt to recharge the groundwater, maintains green space in urban settings, and provides a natural habitat for birds and wildlife; how golf courses are quiet neighbors, requiring a minimum of community services such as police, fire, snow plowing, road repair, sewage, etc.; how some 13,000 golf courses in the U.S. provide hundreds of thousands of jobs, spend billions for goods and services, swell the tax rolls, and help raise millions more for local charities.

Communicate! Communicate! Communicate, Mr. Green Chairman, and get the job done!