



It is not necessary for the club manager to be a turfgrass expert. A basic understanding of the maintenance operation and a good working relationship with the superintendent are the keys to success.

What Do Club Managers Need to Know About Golf Course Management?

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WE ARE LIVING in the age of information overload. In fact, it is getting next to impossible to keep up with all the current information within any particular field. This has led to specialization in many industries. The medical profession is an excellent example. No longer does one doctor treat all of our health care needs. Our children visit a pediatrician; we may make an appointment with a general practitioner who sends us to a radiologist for X-rays and then over to the laboratory for a blood test and then to an internal medicine specialist who refers us to a surgeon.

So what does this have to do with golf course management and the club manager? In addition to running the business affairs of the club, the manager must be familiar with the operation of the restaurant, pro shop, and golf course maintenance departments. Few people have the experience and background in all of these areas to be con-

sidered experts. That is why most clubs hire "specialists" for each department — chefs, golf professionals, and golf course superintendents. The question then becomes, how much does the club manager need to know about each of these areas so that the entire operation runs smoothly?

In the case of the golf course maintenance department, a basic understanding of the operation and pertinent maintenance practices is important. It is impractical to expect the club manager to be well versed in the specific areas of equipment maintenance, irrigation systems, turfgrass science, landscaping, soils and fertilizers, construction techniques, and pest control practices. After all, that is why you hire a professional golf course superintendent! It is important, however, that the club manager know how much involvement is necessary in these areas, and how to cultivate a good working relationship with the golf course superintendent.

The Basics

To understand the golf course maintenance operation, the club manager first must be familiar with the layout of the golf course. If the superintendent or a member starts talking about No. 4 green, the manager should know exactly which area is being discussed.

Next, it is important to understand seasonal changes that affect turf growth and playability and how these changes could possibly affect tournament schedules and maintenance activities. Snow, frost, heavy rains, or extreme heat can be expected during certain times of the year. These factors influence turf growth and often require adjustments to normal maintenance practices. Golfers may complain about not being able to use golf carts after a heavy rain. The manager should know that allowing cart use during such a time can cause extensive damage to the golf course.

Familiarity with golf course cultural programs should be another prerequisite for the club manager. What is core aeration? What is the difference between grooming and vertical mowing? Why do they put so much sand on the greens after aerification? A basic understanding of these programs will help the club manager respond to questions from golfers or the membership. Any specific questions or technical points always should be referred to the golf course superintendent.

Managers should understand golf course equipment requirements. It is not necessary to be well versed in the specifics of engine size and clipping frequency. Concentrate on the inventory requirements, the expected life span of the equipment and preparing to replace old equipment before large expenditures are required for repairs. Let's face it, many pieces of turf equipment cost more than a new automobile. The club manager can help the superintendent protect this large investment and justify the purchase of new equipment when necessary. This translates into improved course conditioning, less downtime and fewer repairs.

Finally, it is important to stay current on the laws and regulations that affect the

operation of the golf course maintenance department. During the past 10 years, superintendents gradually have had to spend more time doing paperwork and less time out on the golf course. This is in response to ever-increasing government regulation. Issues such as worker safety, underground storage tanks, pesticide application, and effluent water use must be handled effectively by the club manager and superintendent to avoid injury or costly litigation.

Club Manager Involvement

There are some areas of the maintenance operation that require the involvement of the club manager — and there are those that do not. Where do you draw the line, and how involved should the manager become?

First, the superintendent should be in charge of all agronomic decisions: what types of fertilizers to buy, when they should be applied, specifying the types and models of equipment that should be purchased, irrigation scheduling, and other such decisions. The club has hired an expert to make these agronomic decisions, and he or she should be allowed to do so without interference.

There are other areas where the involvement of the club manager is critical. One of these is long-range planning. Managers should understand the need for special projects and routine maintenance practices such as core aeration. Coordinating these items with the tournament schedule and club events at least one year in advance will provide continuity for the entire operation. Many clubs have found it helpful to make contingency plans, such as alternate dates for aerification. Both the superintendent and manager should understand that it is impossible to plan for every occurrence. Emergencies are bound to happen at the most inopportune times, and it is important to remain flexible.

Most managers are involved with the budget and finances of the golf course maintenance department. The superintendent should keep the manager informed of all purchases and the need for large capital expenditures. This should be done within the purchasing guidelines of the club. Managers also should be aware of salespersons who approach them about golf course products without going through the superintendent. Oftentimes, these people are

Managers can help protect the club's large investment in turf equipment by understanding the inventory requirements and the need to replace old equipment in a timely manner.





Managers, as well as superintendents, need to stay current on the laws and regulations that affect the maintenance and operation of the golf course. This includes issues such as pesticide application, worker safety, and underground storage tanks.

selling questionable products, or “snake oils.” Get the superintendent involved to help decide the merit of the product.

The Manager/Superintendent Relationship — Tips for Success

Getting along with people and personnel management are generally the most difficult parts of any job. Based on the comments and experiences of several managers and superintendents, there are several things you can do to cultivate a good working relationship.

1. Hold regular meetings and maintain an open-door policy. The upcoming calendar of events, long-range planning, and current information are topics that should be shared on a regular basis. Take the club manager on a regular tour of the course and point out the good things as well as the problem areas. This may be as simple as showing the manager the new piece of equipment that was purchased or what nematode damage looks like. If it is not possible to tour the course, the superintendent always should keep a photo journal of projects and occurrences on the golf course.

2. The manager should know how to handle complaints and filter comments about the golf course. Realize that no matter how good the course is, people are going to complain. It is important to get to the bottom of

the issue and, if necessary, pass this information on to the superintendent. This will prevent relatively minor issues from being blown out of proportion and becoming fodder for the rumor mill.

3. Be honest and supportive in your dealings with each other. If you don't have the answer to a particular question, don't try to make one up. Promise to look into the matter and respond as soon as possible.

4. Attend an occasional seminar with the superintendent to gain a better understanding of current golf course maintenance issues. There are several opportunities each year, such as Green Section Regional Conferences, Cooperative Extension Seminars, and local superintendent association meetings.

While there are several steps you can take to cultivate a good working relationship, there also are things that can destroy that relationship. Here are a few things to avoid:

1. Gossip. Spreading rumors about the superintendent or club manager can lead to serious problems, particularly when mentioned to club members. For example, one manager casually mentioned that the superintendent was away from the course to attend a meeting and that the only reason he attends such meetings is to play golf. This was mentioned in jest; however, it got the entire membership up in arms and resulted in the superintendent being put on suspension.

2. Avoid surprises. As one superintendent described, “Don't make each other look stupid! Avoid awkward situations by keeping each other informed. It can be very embarrassing if a weekday tournament is scheduled on the same day as aerification.”

3. Avoid “kingdom building.” Everyone wants to feel that his or her department should have top priority. Realize that working together makes the entire organization look good.

4. Avoid the temptation of comparing your course too closely with other clubs. Often there are significant differences in the acreage that is maintained, microclimates, soils, budgets, and many other factors.

Summary

The club manager/superintendent relationship can be adversarial. Sharing information and learning some of the basics about the golf course maintenance operation can improve this important working relationship. Some club managers have been accused of “knowing just enough to be dangerous.” With good communication and a willingness to try to understand each other's concerns, this situation can evolve into being one of “knowing just enough to be helpful.”