

# The Team Approach is Alive and Well!

*Using communication to achieve a desired end result.*

by LARRY WISE

COMMUNICATION is defined in the *Webster's New World Dictionary* as a giving and receiving of information by talk, writing, or visual presentation. Relationship is defined in the same book as a connection, as in thought or meaning. To achieve a common goal, these concepts must blend together to allow efforts and pursuits to be successful. When two parties communicate, no goal is too lofty, and the relationship, or team spirit, will prosper.

The Center Valley Club was opened for public play in June 1992. It premiered as an upscale facility that offered bentgrass greens, tees, and fairways, which at the time was a unique combination in the northeast region of Pennsylvania. The Stabler Company developed the golf course as the first phase of a 1,700-acre development known as Stabler Center.

The construction and grow-in of the course was a long, intentionally delayed process. The intent was to allow the turf to mature so a high quality experience could be offered. Once the golf course was opened, the initial golfer reaction was positive. The course was in excellent condition and posed a real challenge to golfers of all skill levels. But problems began in 1994; with increased traffic, the course began to show signs and symptoms of unusual wear, and disease activity was becoming more difficult to control.

The Stabler Company prides itself on satisfying customer needs and meeting their concerns. During the first two seasons, all staff members aggressively solicited customer feedback. Initially, playability of the golf course was a hot topic. This, for example, prompted the construction of two bridges to cover two emergency spillway channels on holes #11 and #18. The prefab custom-designed concrete structures allowed bentgrass to be maintained without interfering with emergency drainage control features. These bridges created a more favor-



*There is no harder task in golf course operations than that of properly coordinating the vital concerns of the golf course superintendent and the golf professional.*

able landing area when playing from the teeing ground. A design flaw was corrected and concerns over fairness were resolved.

In spite of all the early changes to the golf course and increases in turf maintenance expenditures, course conditions regressed during the 1994 season. For example, the 15th green was lost to disease and other greens were showing signs of black layer development. These conditions prompted research into the original construction procedures and materials. Laboratory analysis indicated that very aggressive agronomic procedures were needed to alter the soil profile. To further complicate matters, personnel changes had to be made so that short- and long-term priorities could be achieved. Corrective strategies were needed to restore turf health and quality and the integrity of the course.

By the fall of 1995, John Romig was appointed grounds superintendent. John began as a laborer on the course in 1992 and was a crew foreman and assistant superintendent at the time of his appointment to the superintendent's position. There was a conscious effort to supply John with the necessary decision-making authority to resolve the issues at hand. Maintaining our philosophy of teamwork, cooperation, and communication among all departments and employees was essential to our success.

The USGA Green Section was asked to participate in the planning and scheduling of the necessary agronomic programs to restore uniform turf health. It was decided that turf health, not performance, needed to be restored prior to any course conditioning improvements. At times, it can be a challenging task to coordinate the

concerns of the golf course superintendent and the golf professional. The goals and responsibilities of these individuals at times can conflict, but one is dependent upon the other to achieve team success. On one hand, the golf professional, who in most instances is not trained in agronomy, knows how he or she wants the turf to look and play. For example, level teeing grounds, tightly mowed and well-defined fairways, and smooth greens are all common requests of daily playing conditions. On the other hand, the superintendent is interested in agronomic balance, turf health, and scheduling activities to accomplish his or her tasks with the least amount of inconvenience to the golfer. At times, this can be a balancing act, considering that agronomic procedures should be performed when they will deliver the best results. As director of golf, I realized that some disruption in play had to be tolerated to achieve our overall goal of offering consistent and uniform conditions on a daily basis.

### Establishing Goals

There must be a goal or set of goals established and agreed to by all components of a business. These goals must be established to satisfy the customers you intend to attract with your product. Golfers have needs when they visit any facility, and they have certain expectations when they pay to play on your product. It is vital to know the customers' thoughts, concerns, and desires so goals can be established to meet the value as perceived in the golfer's mind.

A clear understanding of specific goals to achieve a very high degree of consistency for the Center Valley Club was established. The strategies and goals included:

- Establish sound, ongoing agronomic procedures.
- Meet equipment needs to produce the desired product.
- Resolve irrigation shortfalls.
- Improve employees through training and education (a turfgrass intern program was developed).
- Develop a much healthier texture on all 20 greens.
- Establish firmer and more level tee surfaces.
- Resolve problems of the #15 green complex.
- Resolve the black layer problem in the greens.
- Establish a long-term *Poa annua* control program.

- Improve the manner in which the greens receive golf ball impacts.
- Establish consistent ball roll speeds on all greens.
- Prepare and be ready for any national PGA Tour event in the future.
- Fulfill and accomplish all customer evaluations and perceptions.
- Maintain the quality, integrity, and appearance of the facility every day the course is open.

### Accomplishing Goals

We established a weekly team meeting schedule to better facilitate the pro shop staff working with the turf maintenance staff. This opened a direct line of communication that stimulated an ongoing exchange of information. For example, the agronomic staff was informed of all golfing events well in advance and the pro shop staff was informed of all agronomic procedures. Knowing exactly when specific maintenance practices were to occur, such as aeration, topdressing, or vertical mowing, we were able to communicate proactively to golfers before they set foot on the course. This level of communication allowed us to plan our master calendar of events. Focusing on our primary goal of restoring plant health and maintaining it, we planned outings around essential agronomic procedures. With these goals, the turf responds and heals more rapidly and golfer inconvenience is minimized. It has truly been a win-win situation.

Monthly meeting schedules were established so that all departments of the golf course plus the executive level management could participate. It was clearly outlined that we would focus on improving turf health first and then hone course playability and aesthetic appeal. John and his staff were given full authority to accomplish the goals within a specified budget. It was agreed that full cooperation and communication between all departments of golf, food and beverage, pro shop, and executive management was vital to the future growth of the Center Valley Club.

John worked closely with the USGA Green Section agronomist and the reports submitted from the Turf Advisory Service visits. To best facilitate agronomic programs, it was agreed that John would not be made to wait for answers to proposals he made to executive management. The

decisions had to come quickly after the justifications were submitted. These proposals included not only equipment and capital expenditures, but also scheduling and staffing needs. As director of golf, I acted as a conduit to expedite requests while still trying to work within the framework of our corporate structure. This allowed decisions to be returned from executive management in less than seven days so as not to delay the team's progress. With a plan intact, we could request, approve, and implement necessary agronomic and business strategies. Our progress could be measured and efficiency could be evaluated. Strong lines of communication allowed us to pinpoint and remove obstacles that hindered our efforts.

All of these goals previously described have been achieved. The Center Valley Club hosted national PGA Tour events in 1998 and 1999, and the Nike Lehigh Valley Open has been held here each year. Based on the players' post-play reports offered by the PGA Tour, the Center Valley Club was reported to have offered some of the finest, most consistent playing conditions on tour. These statements are in general a tribute to the team effort put forth by the employees of Center Valley Club and the USGA Green Section.

### Conclusion

Of particular importance is the value of communication and cooperation between the pro shop staff and the golf course maintenance staff. Each plays an important role with defined responsibilities. A mutually beneficial relationship exists and thrives to achieve common goals. Roadblocks must be removed so all facets of the operation gel and function smoothly. The real key to our success is the respect that is shown by each member of the team to the other members' responsibilities, knowledge, and opinions. The team process can and does work.

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