

Dealing with Boards, Committees, and the Management Team

Take a proactive effort with those who affect your professional life.

BY ROBERT P. SEXTON



Let the committee know you are working with outside consultants on renovation projects.

One activity in my professional life is to conduct a workshop to help golf course superintendents recognize the importance of and personal benefits to be gained from learning the skills of dealing with boards, committees, and managers in the very emotional world of member-owned country clubs. Whether or not a course is in “good” condition is based as much on opinion as it is on fact. Such opinions are subjective, temporary, emotional, and subject to interpretation. This article considers this gray area and some of the realities and strategies that superintendents should consider to improve their ability to influence these opinions.

To begin, let’s look at why clubs are such different creatures compared to other recreational facilities.

- In other facilities, the management team is empowered to act with the authority of owners’ representatives in dealing with visiting guests who have zero emotional or financial interest in the property. In clubs, it is the exact opposite. Club staffs have limited and fluctuating authority when dealing with long-tenure, repeat customers who, as owner-members, have a substantial emotional and financial interest. To illustrate this point, imagine a ranger asking a member to leave the course for repeatedly parking too close to the green. It is unlikely to happen. However, such a possibility is accepted by the guest as a condition of playing that course.

- Clubs are governed by owners volunteering to serve temporarily on boards and committees. These governing bodies must make the policies and rules concerning the conduct of their fellow owner-members. This task (particularly the role of enforcement) is difficult, sensitive, and often avoided in favor of the more familiar role of involvement with operations.

The job of serving as one of these board and committee (B&C) volunteers, if they execute the responsibility outlined above, is anything but easy. Let’s look at why.



A bunker with poor drainage is a good example of a photo to include with the superintendent's monthly written report. It lets the committee know you want to take action to solve this problem.

- B&C members are constantly being second-guessed by a body of owner-member customers very much used to exerting influence and receiving special treatment. These corporate stockholders aren't just names on a list or a stack of mailing labels. Instead, they ride in your cart and eat at your table. This permanent audience includes non-members (spouses, etc.) who have strong opinions as well.

- Cultural considerations are a powerful, yet subjective, motivation behind making decisions — or avoiding them. An example is whether to have a tough course or one set up for speedier play. The culture factors can include the club's traditions, a chairman's agenda, or, in the area of renovating clubhouses, not wanting to change the décor because of the familiarity it provides. While this also may be true in the corporate world, it is rarely as strong a presence as in clubs because of their emotional foundation (e.g., clubs are an extension of the home).

To summarize, this combination of committees, boards, management staff, and members creates an amazingly fluid organizational structure. The ability of a superintendent (or pro, manager, etc.) to productively navigate these waters is a matter of understanding responsibilities not traditionally taught in the recreation industry. This article will look at three areas: being an educator, getting policies on the record, and the role as a historian. Space permits a full description of only one. I have chosen educator, since it is the foundation upon which the remaining two skills are built.

EDUCATOR

This is, in its simplest form, keeping everyone informed. But in a management environment where the B&C leadership often changes every year, such a traditional task is much more complicated. The main topic is the superintendent's monthly written report. It may sound boring, but it is an extremely effective means of getting your message out to your target audience. Although formal writing is a chore for many, the monthly report need not be long or extremely detailed.

- Concentrate on the facts and get to the point quickly.
- Include pictures to reduce the need for long narratives.
- Make the report something that can be read in two or three minutes and it is much more likely to be read.



Get the word out to the course officials about areas of the golf course experiencing problems. This green lacked sites for hole locations due to surface contours. The usable cupping areas were flagged and the green was photographed to help visually illustrate the problem.

The monthly report is not the only written communications vehicle. The annual orientation is another. But the orientation comes from the monthly report, not the reverse. Understanding some of the immediate and long-term benefits may act as an incentive for you to take this proactive step in managing those to whom you report.

IMMEDIATE BENEFITS

- The story is told your way, emphasizing certain points and providing background. It gets read before the meeting. You can give credit or thank whoever has made significant contributions over the past month, educate people about your staff, warn of potential problems, report on the status of projects, discuss the trend of financial information, remind what was done before, present pros and cons of alternatives, etc.
- It has the best chance of being effective, which can be described as giving reasonable people appropriate information in a timely manner. These reasonable people will often be of assistance at the meeting by addressing the unreasonable comments ("Wait a minute, Harry. Didn't you see what the superintendent said in his report . . .").

LONG-TERM BENEFITS

- First and most important, you increase your credibility. Increased credibility inevitably leads to an increase in your influence. People will listen to what you say, seek your opinion in advance, and give you more flexibility in doing your job. While you are still likely to be second-guessed periodically, it will

happen less frequently, and other people on the committee will assist you more often.

- You will make your supervisor or committee chair more effective. Over time, they will depend on you more, and everyone will know who did the work no matter who takes the credit. Never forget that the money comes from being skilled at handling the tough relationships, not the easy ones. You will be more skilled in communication by being more comfortable in discussing the subjects covered.

The following list is a brief outline of some of the subjects you might include. Note that it is unlikely that any single monthly report will include all of these subjects.

- Course condition: prior month, coming month, problems experienced and how they are being corrected, etc.
- Staff: promotions/terminations, training programs, achievements, marriages, babies. Your goal here is to make your staff come alive to the managers and committees.
- Plant and equipment condition: irrigation, equipment, lakes, etc.
- Other issues and items of interest: member relations, legal/regulatory issues, USGA visits.
- Projects/capital equipment: progress, status of delivery, future needs, etc.
- Attachments: GCSAA articles, industry reports, etc.

The role of educator, via a monthly report, is an essential part of a golf course superintendent's responsibility. What's more important, it is a great skill to acquire.

GETTING IT ON THE RECORD

As with the educator role, this is an essential skill in the transient nature of a club's changing boards and committees.

Invariably there is a need to get the owners to go on the record (OTR) with a written policy. In all the superintendents' groups I have spoken to, this example brings the most universal nodding of heads in agreement. Less agreement is observed when emphasizing that it is the club management staff's job to bring the owners to the point of seeing the need for such documentation, understanding the alternatives, and utilizing your professional recommen-



Show off new equipment and technologies used in the golf course maintenance program.

dations to prepare the documents. Dangerous water has just been entered. But it also prompts the question, "If not you, then who?" In executing this role, a club's management staff must employ any number of strategies, including the use of outside expertise, policies at other courses, etc.

HISTORIAN

In every organization, written documentation is the key to effective organization. In this role, the superintendent should volunteer to draft any number of documents, including the monthly minutes, the newsletter articles from the Green Committee Chairman, and announcements to the members about things affecting the course (temporary greens, etc.). Perhaps the most important task of a historian is to moderate future swings in the actions of the committee, board, or executive management. A well-documented, historical record of past actions and decisions is

the best means of preventing the constant "reinvention of the wheel" that results in lost time, revenue, and effectiveness. The history I am referring to is not the club history, which is a social document, but rather a recording of business-related decisions for new decision-makers to easily absorb and reference as part of their duties.

As an example, consider a tree policy. A history of this policy's ups and downs over the years is a remarkable read.

Without knowing this history, committees cannot make informed decisions, withstand the emotional nature of the crisis of the moment, and gain an appreciation for the difficulty of being a member of the management team in a private club. A history of the policy on memorial trees would include expense tracking,

species, location, maintenance, signage, approval to plant, etc., and — the most important decision — how to get an exception to the policy when an owner-member wants to do something different.

In closing, the main purpose of this article is to encourage superintendents to realize the benefits of becoming more skilled in the arena of interaction with members, their committees and boards, and other members of the management team. As with all skills, this will go with you wherever you work. What's more important, their use will increase the likelihood that your opinion that the course is in good condition will be accepted, as well as your recommendations on what is required if it isn't.

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