

Whose Team Are You On?

If you feel like it is you against them, you have already lost.

BY JAMES FRANCIS MOORE

Over the past few years I have had the pleasure of spending time with some of the young superintendents in my home town. These men remind me of myself when I was a young golf course superintendent. They work long days without getting tired. They are learning their craft through a combination of formal education, trial and error, and input from their peers. They tend to be too hard on their crews (probably because they have the unreasonable expectation that hourly workers should have their same dedication to the golf course). And most days, they really seem to enjoy their careers.

Many seasoned superintendents share these same traits. However, as superintendents travel along their career paths, my unfortunate observation is that a significant number begin to enjoy work less. Some even seem to adopt a “me against them” attitude when it comes to relationships with golfers, coworkers, and employees. I have always felt that if it is “you against them,” you have already lost.

Of course, not all older superintendents find themselves in this confrontational position. Some love their work even more now than they did when they first started. Not surprisingly, these are some of the very best and most successful superintendents in the business.

For the sake of my younger superintendent friends, I thought it would be helpful to see what these older, successful superintendents have in common. I picked five men who I consider to be the best superintendents I have known in my career and

identified the following shared traits (listed in no particular order).

- **They have lives outside the golf course.** These five men contribute to their communities in many ways. One is involved with scouts. A couple are very active in their churches. One coaches his child’s baseball team. Another mentors children without father figures at a local school. As a result, these men don’t have to explain to others that they know more than mowing, watering, and fertilizing — their community involvement makes it obvious to everyone around them. They not only work to improve the turf on their golf courses, they work to improve the community in which they live.
- **They spend their employer’s money as if it were their own.**

I know this might sound a little corny, but this spending philosophy has been somewhat forgotten by many in the industry. Far too many superintendents are willing to spend large sums of someone else’s money on unproven products and technologies. Such individuals often base their purchasing decisions on testimonials, Web sites, and marketing claims instead of science and hard data. The five men at the top of my list monitor new ideas as they are introduced to the industry. However, they also evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the new products. They not only evaluate whether or not the product works as advertised, they also determine whether or not the purchase is economically justifiable.

Next time you get ready to spend someone else’s money, ask yourself two questions. First, would you make the

purchase if you owned the course? Second, is this purchase so necessary that you would be willing to individually approach each of the golfers/members you work for and ask them to take the money out of their wallets to buy this product?

- **They rely strongly on basic turfgrass management principles.** Having made many visits to my top five over the years and closely reviewed their turf management practices, I am always amazed at the simplicity of their agronomic programs. There is nothing magic, overly complex, or secret about their methods. They rely primarily on the principles they learned in Turfgrass 101. Their turf grows well because they make certain it has a good growing environment in which to flourish.

As simple as this sounds, it is by no means easy to implement. It takes a lot of hard work to provide proper drainage, good irrigation coverage, plenty of light and air movement, and to implement sound cultivation, mowing, fertilization, pesticide, and traffic control programs. My top five have managed to successfully combine them to achieve a very positive synergistic effect. They concentrate their efforts on programs they know have the biggest overall turf impact and not waste valuable time, money, and effort searching for miracle fixes.

- **These five men know a lot about the game of golf.** While none is likely to play on the tour, they are all reasonably good players, understand the rules of the game, know the proper way to mark a course for tournaments, and are familiar with the history of the

game as well as current events. They promote golf at their courses and are constantly looking for ways to make the game more enjoyable to *their* players. As a result, golfers look at these men as authorities on the game they love, not just as caretakers of the grass on which it is played.

● **These guys know who they work for.** How many people who play your course do you know? Ride around the course with my top five and you will be amazed that they seem to know everyone on the course and address them by name. It is not just the “high-rollers” and low-handicappers who receive these men’s attention. They also know the elderly couple who come out in the evening for a relaxing nine and couldn’t care less about the daily Stimp-meter reading. This is customer service at its best.

Obviously, learning so many faces and names is difficult and requires a concerted effort. Start with the people who are on your course the most often. Check the handicap roster and select the 25 people who play the most

rounds. Once you have them down, you will find it easier to learn the next 25.

● **Finally, every one of these five men make it known that they enjoy their work.** Sure they have problems and have to lobby for additional support for the golf course. But there is a big difference between constant griping to whoever happens to be within earshot and making a professional presentation to the leadership of the course. All five of these men are true team players. They work together with and support the efforts of the manager, the golf professional, and the leadership of the course. Disagreements among the management team are resolved in the meeting room, over breakfast, or maybe even during a round of golf — never through back-channel lobbying of the players/members.

Obviously, there are many other traits shared by the most successful superintendents in our industry. Honesty, a good sense of humor, a supportive

spouse, patience, and fortitude all improve your chances of success. Good financial planning helps offset the worry and stress of working in an industry where employment is sometimes tenuous. Learning to trust key employees and give those around you a chance to excel will give you more time to enjoy life in general.

Even with all this going for them, my younger superintendent friends will encounter many potholes during their careers. It is important to remember that potholes are a part of every career worth pursuing, and the road never becomes perfectly smooth. The key is developing work habits that make the ride along the way as enjoyable as possible.

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