

# The Voice of Experience

Making your staff feel important is the key to good crew management.

BY KENNETH A. GORZYCKI, CGCS

Without even being aware of it, I began developing my people skills long before I became a golf course superintendent. My first recollection of how to treat people in the work place came in the early 1970s when I was working on the maintenance crew at a municipal golf course in my home town in central Texas. There were only about four or five guys on the crew and we were “supervised” by the crew foreman, John. I am sure my perspective was rather slanted at the time, being a teenage kid working on my first golf course and my first *real* job, but my perception was very real to me and it had a great impact on who I became and how my career evolved.

I have to be honest — John was about the *worst* supervisor I have ever had, but I probably learned more valuable life lessons from him than anyone I have ever known besides my father. It was my impression at the time that all John did was ride around the course in his utility vehicle to make sure we were not sleeping under a tree. It was not like John could sneak up on anyone. He cruised the course in an old truckster that I am sure still had the original muffler, or what was left of it.

John never got closer than about 100 yards from us, never waved, never came over to say hello, and never asked how you were doing or to see if you needed some help. He just kept his distance and cruised right by you. At the time, I was young and naive enough to interpret his behavior as being distrustful, and I found it to be offensive and unmotivating.

So, as any typical brash teenage kid would probably do, I found myself

loafing between John’s rounds. Heck, I was not the only one. In fact, I was probably peer-pressured into that attitude from the older guys on the crew. We would slack off until we heard John’s truckster approaching a couple of holes away, pick up the pace until he passed by, and then go back to slacking off again. I guess that was our way of getting even with him.

The classic story about John occurred on a day that Corky was push-mowing the creek bank on the right of the sixth hole; this was before the days of the Weedeater. John came into the shop that afternoon bragging about how hard Corky was working every time he came by. One of the things John did not know, nor was he told, was how Corky spent most of that day sleeping against a tree in the woods. When he heard John approaching, he hopped up and pushed that mower up and down the creek banks until John passed by. The funny part was that John never knew that the mower was never even running!

I finally realized my behavior was against my character and integrity. Just because I resented John’s method of *supervision*, it did not justify my actions. Once I came to that realization, I made a conscious commitment to never treat my employees that way if I ever had the chance.

As chance would have it, I did have that opportunity several years later and I have never forgotten the valuable lessons I learned from John on how *not* to treat people.

Some of those valued lessons include:

1. Call your employees by name and make a sincere effort to wave and make eye contact whenever you see them.

2. Treat your employees with respect and honor.

3. Never embarrass an employee in front of others.

4. Clearly tell your employees what you want done and let them tell you how they plan to get it accomplished.

5. The best ideas come from the employees performing the tasks.

6. Do not ask your employee to do anything you are not willing to do or have not done yourself.

7. Let your employees know you are not too good to do their job and that you actually can do it.

8. Be dependable, honest, reliable, and consistent.

9. Do not play favorites.

10. Make your idea their idea and then give them the credit.

11. Be a better listener than a talker.

12. Employees work *with* you, not *for* you.

13. Always *ask* your employees to do things rather than *telling* them.

14. Support your employees’ decisions and then coach them on how to do better the next time.

15. Leave home at home and work at work.

16. Avoid being buddies with your employees, but still have fun with them.

17. Always stay professional.

18. Lead by example.

When riding the golf course, I try to call the members and employees by name and visit with them whenever possible. Even if just passing by at a distance, I will at least make the effort to smile, wave, and make eye contact. This gives them an opportunity to get my attention if needed.

During my earlier years (more so than now), I would have the oppor-



tunity to assist the crew with their job assignments or give the crew a short break while I operated their equipment. I'd tell them to take my cart and go get a drink of water while I finish mowing their fairway or rough. This also gave me a chance to evaluate the performance of their piece of equipment and showed them I actually knew how to do what I assigned them to do.

A few times a year, I like to treat the employees to a staff appreciation day. This year, our Men's Golf Association board found out we were treating the crew and wanted to get involved to show their appreciation for all the crew does for them throughout the year. They donated enough additional funds to upgrade our menu to steaks, and they even volunteered to serve and wait on the staff during lunch at the maintenance shop. Some of them were surprised when they realized we had about 100 employees for them to serve. Several of them even donated gift cards and items for a crew drawing. That day made a huge impression on both the crew and the members. The crew now recognizes those members on the course, and the members enjoy that personal connection when they see those crew members on the course.

For foreign-speaking employees, little things like attempting to speak to them in their own language puts you on their level, shows respect for their culture, and shows that you care about who they are. Make the effort to get to know a little about your employee's family and show a genuine interest in their well-being.

I have always tried to take good care of my staff; it is a fact that I cannot be successful without them. Whenever my wife and I clean out our closet or the garage or buy a new appliance or piece of luggage, I bring the discarded items to the shop and give them to the crew. Clothes and toys for the kids are always the first items claimed. My mother even saves things for me to bring to the crew. When my dad

passed away, everything in my dad's closet the family did not want was given to my crew — boots, watches, clothes, belts, you name it. Someone always finds a use for everything and there is never anything left at the end of the day.

During the scorching Texas summers, we provide packages of Gatorade mix for the crew to mix in their water coolers. Not only is it a small treat for the crew, but it also provides a little additional safety for the crew from the stress of the grueling summer heat.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of performing employee reviews on schedule; it may be the single most beneficial thing you can do for your staff and yourself. If you bring it up to them, they will generally be grateful you care enough about them to make the time to do their review and get their merit increase on schedule

without them having to ask. They know when their review is due and feel disrespected and mistreated if their review is missed or delayed. By the time they finally get around to asking you about it, they will probably be dissatisfied with whatever review or increase they may get.

Having a good relationship with your members and staff is really one of the most rewarding things you can do in this business. Don't do it for them . . . do it for yourself. Achieving successful relationships is the result of developing good communication habits and mutual respect. Authority can be assigned, but respect has to be earned. Keep in mind that it is not what you get out of life that matters; it is what you leave behind.

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A staff appreciation lunch is an excellent way to express thanks for the efforts of the staff. The Barton Creek Resort (Austin, Texas) Men's Golf Association board pitched in and served lunch at this year's event as a way to say thanks to the crew.