

It Needs to be a Relationship, Not a Battle

Communication is the starting point!

BY KEITH HAPP

Do you look forward to going to work, or do you dread having to deal with questions about how turfgrass maintenance tasks are performed and how the turf is presented? Are the challenges of the profession stimulating, or are demands so severe that you can't wait to get away? The golf course superintendent profession is being articulated by many as a "we against them" occupation. Comments such as "Golfers just don't understand!" or "How am I going to do that?" or "What should I eliminate to accomplish that task?" are very common. Economic pressures place an ever-increasing emphasis on efficiency and economy of scale. Budget cutbacks mandate significant creativity in the manner in which course preparation is carried out. Facing these daily stresses may lead one to want to escape or become invisible. Nevertheless, avoidance is the worst approach when dealing with demanding golfers. Being visible and willing to communicate is fundamental to the profession of the golf course superintendent.

Preventive maintenance used on the course should also be utilized when dealing with golfers. Proactive communication helps fertilize and perpetuate a strong relationship. It is essential to minimize incorrect interpretation or speculation regarding turf care practices. How do you build a relationship with the committees and chairpersons at your facility? Are you available? Are you willing to answer questions brought to you by the chairperson? Do you have an open-door policy that applies to golfers and not

just to your employees? These are just a few of the questions that need to be answered to establish open lines of communication.

AVAILABILITY

Establish a routine that makes you available on the first tee at least once or twice a week to greet players. For example, if there is a frost delay, who better to explain to golfers the rationale for holding play until the frost dissipates? That opportunity to educate could prove to be invaluable in the future.

The practice range tee is also an excellent place to answer questions about course care and setup. The details associated with maintaining the teeing ground can be discussed, along with many other course care issues.

There are other communications opportunities to consider, too.

Make it a point to have lunch in the clubhouse. Establish a designated time when players can eat with you and ask questions. At the very least, sit at a table with four chairs so there is room for players to join you.

Train your staff to bring things to your attention. If they hear a complaint, it should be handled promptly and with a cool head. Questions or concerns ranging from difficult hole locations to dirty towels on the ball washers will arise.

Play the course with members. Once again, establish a time to allow golfers to sign up to play with the golf course superintendent. You don't have to play as well as Tiger Woods. After all, the goal is to improve communication efforts.

Don't be afraid to answer questions while playing golf or just being on the course. If a question cannot be answered immediately, just say that you don't know but will find out as soon as possible. Not knowing is not a sign of weakness. Offering a confident response is a sign of being accountable. **There are no dumb questions.** Make an effort to answer in understandable language and respond as promptly as possible.

Complaints and questions should be handled through proper channels. For example, the green chairman should be the conduit for problem resolution. However, simple questions or course setup concerns can and should be discussed in an open manner. Build your communications skills and then make the effort to exercise them. For example, speak to the various groups at your facility.

Public relations is important, and the manner in which communication is performed can characterize the person in charge. A profession is defined as a calling that requires specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation. A professional is defined as one who engages in a pursuit or activity professionally. Make the effort to stay engaged in the communication process; it will pay off. A strong relationship between the golf course maintenance department and golfers needs regular fertilization.

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