

Achieving Personnel Success

Paying close attention to the human side of golf course management is a vital part of producing exceptional playing conditions.

BY PAUL H. VERMEULEN



Veteran superintendents all recognize that a vigorous training program that promotes teamwork and attention to detail is the key to producing exceptional playing conditions.

When it comes to fine-tuning the condition of any golf course, it goes without saying that one person, the golf course superintendent, can make the difference between excellence and mediocrity. Although the validity of this statement is beyond reproach, it is equally important to appreciate the deeper meaning of *one human being can make all the difference in the world*. More specifically, superintendents deserve recognition for great course conditions, but such recognition should largely be for their personnel management skills and not simply their hands-on activities. To emphasize key elements of personnel management, this article casts a light on some of the trade secrets that experienced superintendents believe have been important to their success.

Getting a course ready for play each day requires a staff of anywhere from 15 to 50 people, but more important than the actual number is the fact that they must all rely on each other to uphold a high standard. For instance, if the 50th member of the crew neglects to syringe the greens on a hot afternoon, does it really matter if the other 49 crew members did everything else perfectly?

Based on their actions, successful superintendents are in agreement that one of the first steps toward achieving high employee performance is to provide ample training. Without extensive training, even a relatively straightforward assignment like fairway mowing can produce disappointing, if not potentially costly, results. For example, the immediate signs of an improperly trained equipment operator on fairways are banana-shaped mow lines, wheel ruts in soft ground, and scalped turf



In the short time span of an afternoon, an employee without adequate training can unwittingly cause extensive damage across large areas of a golf course.

along the fairway perimeters. Further, given that the price of today's technically sophisticated fairway mowers can exceed \$50,000, an untrained operator who unwittingly drives with an air filter clogged with grass clippings can cause extensive mechanical damage in one afternoon.

Training new employees to take proper care of a golf course also involves far more than instructing them on how a particular piece of equipment turns on and off and turns left and right. For example, before someone can mow greens numbers 5, 7, 12, 14, and 18, they need to become familiar with the course's layout in order to find them. Then, once they find them, they need to know what to do if golfers are approaching, how to tell if the irrigation system ran as programmed by the superintendent, and how to be able to identify disease symptoms that are only visible before a green is mowed.

The foundation of a good training program for new employees typically includes the review of instructional videos and/or booklets, one-on-one instruction from the turf equipment technician, and one-on-one instruction from a senior supervisor or superintendent. From beginning to end, any training program must further stress

operator safety and proper technique for producing high-quality results. Although expensive and time consuming, good training is essential to producing exceptional playing conditions, and under no circumstances should someone be allowed to start work without it.

Given the extensive time and effort required to train new employees, it is

easy to appreciate the importance of minimizing turnover. Maintaining a competitive wage scale is an essential part of keeping employee turnover to a minimum, but superintendents who also focus their attention on employee welfare ultimately have the lowest turnover rates. Starting with the maintenance facility, a clean, well-organized working environment is a must for retaining valuable workers. In an earlier *Green Section Record* article titled "Getting It Right" by Bo Links (Nov./Dec. 2005), the author details how constructing a modern 12,000- to 14,000-square-foot maintenance facility as a replacement for an undersized, corrugated metal building with dirt floors immediately uplifted staff morale. The connection to employee retention is that providing good working conditions or, more specifically in Bo's case, building a modern facility, demonstrates the importance of everyone's efforts.

In addition to addressing appropriate work surroundings, providing simple creature comforts can demonstrate how important an employee's role is



To produce the highest level of course conditioning, new employees require many hours of one-on-one training with the superintendent and other senior staff members.

to achieving success. Such comforts might include an oversized locker for storing personal hand tools, rain gear, etc.; catered meals from the clubhouse; a dryer for wet work clothes during the rainy season; low-cost vending machines; personalized parking spaces; and comfortable furniture in the break room. The vital message is to show appreciation to those who literally get the job done each day no matter the temperature or weather conditions.

Another familiar component of successful personnel management is taking a genuine interest in each employee. On a professional level, this effort amounts to identifying a task or tasks that best suit(s) an individual's talents and then amplifying them with additional training. It may seem odd, but astute superintendents have discovered that some employees have an interest in perfecting uncomplicated tasks, such as trimming bunker edges with a weedeater, while others require expansive job descriptions to retain interest in their positions. By the same token, it also is important that employees have some means of gauging their performance, whether their responsibilities are simple or complicated.

To help assess a worker's interests, some superintendents elect to use questionnaires. For example, student interns can be asked to spell out three to five activities they would like to include in their summer work schedule. Some might leave the questionnaire all but blank, which can indicate that they are either as green as the grass or have little interest in challenging themselves. Others may continue writing on the back of the page, which can indicate that they are either overeager or have a sincere interest in forwarding their careers as quickly as possible by learning all that they can. In both cases, the



Finding the right job for each employee is essential to making the most of everyone's individual strengths and interests. While some employees enjoy demanding job responsibilities, others with a keen eye for detail enjoy the challenge of straightforward tasks.

key is that the superintendent takes an interest in them as individuals and, in turn, tries to work on a strategy that best suits their unique qualifications and interests.

On a personal level, perceptive superintendents make an effort to learn what interests an employee off the clock. In some cases, learning about an employee's activities away from the golf course can help tailor the daily routine in a manner that improves job performance or in some way benefits the condition of the course. An example would be that some employees have a knack for masonry or carpentry work, and if presented with the opportunity

would enjoy completing special projects like retention wall construction or remodeling the break room. In most cases, however, learning about after-hours activities is simply a sincere way of building working relationships that foster high morale and lasting employee loyalty.

Also part of building productive employee relationships is giving feedback on a regular basis. While this topic may conjure up images of delivering harsh words to an uncooperative employee, experienced superintendents realize that giving feedback, both negative and positive, is a critical part of their success. Furthermore, they realize that there is actually more to be gained from giving positive feedback to each and every member of the crew. In so doing, employees are eager to take their work to the next level, because they know that their extra efforts make a difference.

Then, when employees improve

their performance, they become role models for others around them to do good work.

In closing, any discussion about the essential elements of sustainable turfgrass management would be incomplete without including the most important one — the human element. To achieve personnel success in the field of golf course management, a winning strategy is to simply pay close attention to experienced superintendents who support those who support them.

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