

Communication in the Workplace

Say what you mean and mean what you say!

BY DAVID OATIS



There is no substitute for straightforward, face-to-face communication!

USGA agronomists field all kinds of questions during the course of a Turf Advisory Service visit, just as superintendents do every day. The successful agronomist/superintendent must learn to consider carefully the questions posed during a visit. Some questions are harder to interpret than others, and at times there also may be language barriers. Agronomic terms are used by superintendents, whereas course officials may use terms or jargon from their line of work. Not surprisingly, this can produce confusion, misunderstandings, and frustration. The end result can be unhappy/unsatisfied golfers, or worse yet, an unwanted change of employment.

One would think that with all of our modern communication aids (phone, voicemail, email, texts, etc.) we would communicate more effectively than ever. You could certainly argue that there is more communication going on now than ever before, and on the surface, that would

seem like a positive. Unfortunately, communication sometimes is conducted so quickly and haphazardly that it raises more questions than it answers. Some communication is so filled with jargon and cliché that a translator is needed to decipher the message. Here are a few tips aimed at making you a more effective communicator.

WRITE CLEARLY AND SUCCINCTLY

Remember the email question you recently sent? The email was not read carefully, so the response was not thorough. A follow-up email then had to be sent, but this too was read quickly and another incomplete answer was fired off. Now a third email was sent, rewording the original question. Since the person receiving the email clearly was distracted or in a hurry, he did not take the time to read the chain of emails that preceded your third try, so this, too, was unsuccessful. Both parties are speaking different languages and both are becoming aggravated. Worse yet, the third attempt was copied to others who did not take the time to read the first email or the preceding chain. They now weigh in on what they think the question is, or, being confused, elect to just ignore it. In either event, more time has been wasted and the frustration level goes up another notch!

In this example, plenty of communication has occurred, but it was done so haphazardly that it created more confusion than it dispelled. Everyone now seems to have a PDA or smart phone, and while these tools can make communication faster and easier, they also make it easy to respond too quickly and from locations that are not conducive to thoughtful communication. With a hand-held device, it also can be tougher to thoroughly assimilate the information in longer email messages. As the saying goes, "Haste makes waste."

TIPS

- Take the time to email clearly. Keep messages short and to the point, leaving no doubt as to the intent of your communication.



Few golfers or committee members understand the relationship between winter shade and winter injury. It can be tough to get golfers out on the course during the colder months, so a picture can tell the story.

- Set off questions in bullet points for clarity and organization.
- Read email carefully and completely before responding. If the intent is not clear, you may need to ask for clarification.
- Make sure you are answering all of the questions posed.
- If you do not have the time to do a thorough job, do it later when you have the time. You may want to send a quick email acknowledging receipt of the message and stating that you will respond as soon as you are able.
- Some questions are so involved that they cannot be answered easily on a PDA, so avoid the temptation to fire off that quick answer “just because you can.” Responding quickly, but inaccurately or incompletely, saves no time.
- Email and text messages are handy forms of communication, but they cannot replace a phone call. If the question is too complex, you’re better off picking up the phone and discussing it, rather than writing multiple lengthy emails that do not adequately resolve the issue.

BE DIRECT

For some individuals, being direct and confronting others about a problem or important issue is an uncomfortable proposition. Some avoid confrontations like the plague and unintentionally try indirect forms of communication to get around their difficulty. For instance, they may

talk about a problem or issue they are having with an individual behind that individual’s back. In addition to being highly unprofessional, the discussions inevitably get back to the individual, but not before many other people hear about it. The problem or issue usually grows in significance as this happens, and bad feelings are virtually assured. This indirect form of communication undermines confidence and respect.

In an effort to avoid a confrontation, some may skirt the controversial points or just hint at the problem, hoping the other party will “get the hint.” The extremely perceptive communicator may pick up on this, but most will not. Usually, the two parties end the discussion with very different views of what transpired. One will think the message is sufficient to effect change; the other will think something very different. Both will be disappointed.

- The solution is to be direct, but not rude. Express your desires and give concrete examples of the problem or the types of things you want to see upgraded, changed, or accomplished. Confronting an employee or employer and working through the problem may be uncomfortable, but it is effective and necessary.

- Consider putting your thoughts in writing, or at least making an outline or a list of the issues you want to discuss. This action will help you organize your thoughts and ensure that nothing is left out or forgotten.



Getting committee members out on the course and showing them the progress on construction projects, or how maintenance operations are accomplished, can reduce confusion.

- Do not beat around the bush or make vague and ambiguous statements. For example, golfers are famous for saying, “We want to take the course to the next level.” It is understood that you want to upgrade the course; it is not clear what specific areas you have in mind. Is it playability, aesthetics, or agronomics, or are you thinking about service or presentation issues? Time and money are precious, and both can be conserved by being direct and clear.
- Avoid requests or directives that are subject to interpretation. If you do not get the results you desire, it may be the result of a misinterpretation. It is impossible to respond appropriately to requests when they are not fully understood, so save time and money and communicate clearly.

Do not become aggravated if clarification is requested; take it as a sign that you are not speaking the same language. Never assume!

KEEP MEETINGS SHORT

People are busy and have short attention spans. If you want to hold everyone’s attention, keep the meeting on track and moving. This does not imply that discussion should be stifled; it just means keeping the discussion focused on the matters at hand.

AVOID BEING A “BOTTOM LINE” PERSON OR COMMITTEE

This is the individual or committee that makes demands (e.g., reduce/increase the budget, cut labor, fix this, take care of that, etc.) but refuses to participate in the decision-making process. This person/committee chooses not to listen to why a certain course of action may or may not be a good idea, or what the potential ramifications might be. This person/committee may also play the “brinkmanship” game, taking the “do this or else” approach. While this type of communication usually gets results, the results often are much less than desired.

Many courses currently are trying to reduce their maintenance budgets because of the current economic downturn. Most maintenance budgets can be cut in many different areas to generate cost savings. However, each cut produces an effect, so the wise

superintendent and committee will discuss options and mutually agree where cutbacks can have the biggest impact on the budget and the least impact on the golfers.

BEFORE YOU HIT “SEND”

Okay so far? All fired up to be direct? Stop and take a deep breath. Before you hit “send” and fire off that direct (read angry) memo, walk away from your desk. Wait until you calm down and are thinking rationally. Better yet, have a trusted friend or colleague read it over first. Toning down a first attempt at a “very direct” communication is wise. Your message may need to be firm, but it should not be emotional.

SAY IT WITH A SMILE!

Moods and attitudes are contagious, so be aware of the messages you are sending with your

attitude and demeanor. If you frown a lot or have a worried look on your face, it will be transferred to others. If you are negative, your negativity also will be transferred. Keeping a positive, friendly, and professional attitude makes other people feel good. Doing so will help you communicate more effectively.

USE OF CLICHÉ OR JARGON

There are many examples of this “failure to communicate.” Do you find yourself using these types of expressions?

- Lying in the weeds.
- Please provide a brief top-line summary of things.
- I will be sure to loop back with you.
- The real nuts and bolts of putting things together.
- Turn the key on.
- This may be a better option if things go dark.
- The committee needs to break down the silos.
- Should we regroup to get our ducks in a row?
- I’ll be out of pocket for a while.
- Etc.

People in your line of work or in your social circle may understand some of these expressions, but to others, they may seem like a foreign language. These types of expressions, just like analogies, can be effective communication aids, but only if they are understood. Jargon has its place, but do not assume everyone understands yours. To be fair, golf course superintendents and Green Section agronomists use plenty of “turf jargon” and acronyms. Golf course management is a very technical and specialized field, so it has its own vocabulary. But as a committee or board member, it is up to you to interrupt and ask questions to make sure you understand what is being discussed and recommended.

We all are constantly communicating with our words, our actions, and our attitudes. Make sure you are sending the message you want. Be sure you “say what you mean and mean what you say.”

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Let’s get cracking before I’m out of pocket. This GASD edition, like the IGA version, needs updating before we sunset this session. Soak on this a bit, then move things to the top-line premier label so subsequent issues go dark.

