

ALL ABOARD!

Working together has never been more essential!

BY KEITH HAPP

Cooperation and compromise are two words that are frequently used during economic downturns, and it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what expenses and investments are fair or essential to sustain the operation. The differences between necessity and luxury become blurred when the bottom line is under close scrutiny; however, for the organization to succeed, a common goal must be pursued and agreed upon by all.

Golf course maintenance budgets in 2009 have been flat when compared to budgets from 2008. A very low percentage of facilities have received an increase in operating funds. Doing more with less has been the mantra, which is reinforced by golfer expectations of doing the same with less! While budgets are decreasing, conditioning and expectations are not. Open lines of communication among all parties are essential, and department heads need to be in agreement when it comes to meeting the needs of golfers.

This is the first of three articles that examine the views and perspectives of the three parties most involved with meeting the needs and desires of golfers. Twelve department heads were interviewed: four general managers (GM), four golf course superintendents (GS), and four golf professionals (GP) each were presented with the same list of questions. The questions ranged from the importance of their role in delivering member satisfaction, to dealing with conflict. Pitfalls and frustrations, areas of agreement, conflict management, important aspects of their job, and understanding the scope of their role in daily operations were discussed. The responses provide insight into the decision-making process.

The first article presents responses from the General Managers. To elicit open responses, anonymity was provided to the respondents, identified as GM 1 through GM 4.



Course conditioning problems should be discussed openly so that golfers are provided with prompt, consistent information from the golf course staff.



Discussing upcoming events, course conditioning, and problem issues is a must. Department heads should meet on a regular basis. Weekly meetings, even if only conducted for a short time, can be very productive.

QUESTION #1 What is the single most important aspect of your job?

GM1: The most important part of the job is sustaining the highest level of service to our members so that we can maximize membership satisfaction throughout the club. This means our service to those enjoying tennis, dining, swimming, or golf must remain at the highest level. We cannot alter our effort because one specific amenity has greater participation.

GM2: Promoting an atmosphere of camaraderie, friendship, and consistent service to our members and guests is most important. We can accomplish this only by creating a pleasant and professional work environment for our staff. We have a primary goal of member satisfaction, but we need to look after our staff to accomplish goal number one!

GM3: Our number-one goal is to develop a sense of teamwork between all department heads to allow us to achieve membership satisfaction. We take a holistic approach to the satisfaction of our members. This means our superintendent must have an understanding of the importance of the culinary staff, the chef understands what our tennis pro does, and the aquatics director understands what our golf professional's role is. Our members use all different departments, and their experience doesn't stop once they walk off the golf course; it continues through the dining room. The general manager plays an important role by promoting a sense of unity, allowing a holistic approach of service to resonate through the respective departments.

GM4: Communication is the top priority. We have high-quality individuals who try to do

their jobs the best they can, and my job as a GM is to be a support system for them. I must communicate with them to ensure that they understand the vision and our organizational goal. We all have knowledge of what our jobs are, but we can't operate alone; we need to be in constant communication. I meet every Friday morning for breakfast with the grounds superintendent and golf professional, and we look at the next week's calendar as well as two or three weeks out. We talk about last week and we talk about the week to come.

QUESTION #2 What is the single biggest pitfall of your job? Most frustrating?

GM1: No matter how well we think we are talking to one another, whether it is through email or in person, individually or departmentally, there always seems to be some element of communication breakdown. This leads to misinformation, which can get to the membership and undermine what is most important to us: keeping the members satisfied and happy. We cannot afford to have any negative information trickle down to the golfers.

GM2: Although it occurs infrequently, one of the most frustrating events can be conflict with fellow employees or senior staff. While we want to be harmonious, at times it takes coaching to sustain this environment. We need and want to have all departments to be open, professional, and courteous with one another. It always seems that discord develops when you are most busy. Departmental harmony is the key to the success of our organization.

GM3: I think the biggest pitfalls lie with working with committee structures and boards. Personally, I embrace the committee structure. I like working through committee chairmen and then ultimately through our board of directors.

We work very hard at utilizing and educating new board and committee members who want to provide their services, energy, and time to their club. But we need to clearly define what their role is. The pitfalls develop when a committee or board member blurs the line between club governance and club management. I believe it is the role of the general manager, superintendent, golf professional, and chef to manage the day-to-day operation of the facility. The committees' and board's roles are to provide guidance for the management staff.

GM4: A change in club governance positions is a pitfall. It is a must to promote proper orientation of club governance by looking ahead and positioning the right members for leadership roles. As the GM, it is critical to obtain goals from the owners (golfers) and clearly define those goals to staff. The committee members, chairmen, board members, and staff are all trying to accomplish their respective duties. However, there are much more committee turnover and changes of membership compared to the tenure of our staff. Finding and educating effective leaders is a huge challenge.

QUESTION #3

Do other key department heads understand the scope of your job?

GM1: They understand that I am trying to bring it together. I meet specifically with each department once a week. So, for example, the golf superintendent, golf professional, and I meet every Thursday at 10:00 a.m. We discuss upcoming events, course conditioning, and whether there are any problems that need to be communicated to the golf professional. He is the one who is the primary contact with members before they get onto the course. The three of us have these discussions on a weekly and monthly basis. We also do round-table discussions with all department heads. Everybody has an opportunity to make known what is going on for the month. These meetings help us manage the golfers who tend to ask questions. We want to be ready, consistent, and accurate with our responses!

GM2: Staff and key department heads understand the scope of my job. They realize the complexity of the club organization, the difficulties of meeting members' requests and expectations, and understand that budget limits exist. Several times, I have asked an employee, "Would you like to take over my job duties?" They all refused.

GM3: Successful organizations have good leadership at all levels. When things are positive within the economy and industry, people tend to go about their business without concern. When we are challenged, as we are right now with economic pressures, I think the true leadership stands out. Not just at the general manager's level, but at all department levels. I think the department heads understand my role and I understand theirs.

GM4: We have up to 300 staff here at any one time, and they understand that I am here to support them. They know I am at many of the committee meetings. We are a total sport recreational club, so we have maintenance committee meetings, curling committee meetings, skeet committee meetings, house committee meetings, winter/summer sports committee meetings, racquet sports committee meetings, and golf and grounds meetings. We've got a director of communications and an HR director who communicate to staff. I think they understand and see the scope of the position, particularly when I have a department head meeting and 20 people are sitting around the table.



QUESTION #4

What are your areas of conflict?

GM1: I don't get into conflicts over specifics or technical knowledge. That is why these people were hired and I trust in their expertise. Conflict usually arises with a communication problem or a member satisfaction concern that was compromised by actions taken by an individual without communicating their actions to all departments.

Golfer satisfaction is goal number one. As general manager, it is essential to understand the needs and goals of each department, while striving to achieve the over-arching operational goals.

GM2: All superintendents hear it, “Watch overtime, watch your staff schedules, and manage the budget.” I think it is my fiduciary responsibility to address these issues, but I also have a fiduciary responsibility to recognize when a person wants to do more or wants to produce a better product. I have to be the one who goes to bat for him or her. For example, you have to watch the overtime, but the greens are burning up! I have to go to bat for the resources to make sure our team goals are met. Conflicts are going to develop, but even with today’s economic issues, decisions have to be made.

GM3: Resource allocation is an issue. We ask our department heads to work together, and this means sharing resources. One of our biggest problems is labor resources. How do you say that the tennis facility is less important than the golf course, or that the aquatic center is more important than the golf cart fleet? Take any one of these elements out of the holistic management of the facility, and you cannot operate with the focus on total service. When everybody is being asked to work a little bit smarter, it all comes down to the allocation of dollars, resources, and human resources. We want to make the right decision and make sure that our people have the tools to be successful.

At a mid-level club like ours, everyone is being asked to do more with less, but expectations are actually elevated in this environment because members are seeking more value for their membership dollars.

GM4: The challenge is balancing and maintaining a coalition of leadership because the

individuals here are professionals and they are leaders in their own right. It is critical to understand what their needs are, what their goals are, and anticipate conflict before it happens. We need to have knowledge of the job and know our people because the biggest area of conflict is that leadership (department heads) can stray from the goals we as a club originally put forth. So trying to anticipate and achieve a balance in a way that maintains high morale, spirit of camaraderie, and professionalism, is probably one of the bigger challenges I face. It is exciting when this challenge is met, because it means we as a group have achieved success.

QUESTION #5

What are the areas of agreement?

GM1: The development of a long-range plan for club improvements is our biggest area of agreement. The weekly, year-long, and five- to ten-year goals are incorporated into one document. For the three of us and our facility, this document is our biggest accomplishment.

GM2: We all agree that department heads should have strong support systems. For example, our superintendent has brought in highly qualified assistants, and you can see the improvement in the productivity and training of their staff. The grounds staff is very well organized. The level of teaching and instruction has allowed for more efficient operations on the course.

GM3: We need total department involvement when we look at the allocation of dollars and the allocation of human resources per department. Each department head must make the decisions. Every Thursday morning we meet and everybody has an equal voice. I facilitate the meeting and I am the mediator. Some departments are larger than others, so larger percentages may be allocated as needed. However, the tennis pro is just as involved as the superintendent when we are talking about the allocation of resources and how they can best be used to satisfy our membership.

GM4: Striving for perfection! Our senior department heads are perfectionists and leaders in their own right. Meeting their needs makes this job rewarding. The fact that they are trying to be the best they can be, and not at the expense of other people or the organization, makes us a strong team. Striving for perfection each year makes the job different and more enjoyable. If I had someone who was not striving

The golf professional is the primary contact with golfers before they reach the course. It is important to communicate any issues on the course that may affect play. It also is an opportunity for the golf course superintendent to gather feedback from the pro shop staff regarding golfers’ comments and concerns on course care and presentation.





to be better every year, or to be the best at their position, it would simply not be acceptable.

QUESTION #6

Where do you rate the importance of the golf course to the overall operation?

GM1: We are a full-service country club, but our golf course is the driving force behind our revenues. It is the reason we can attract new members. We invest our money and efforts into making sure that our golf professional can run events and our superintendent can condition the course as our golfers' desire. We have seen an influx of new members since we made improvements to our course over the last five years.

Our long-range plan helps direct our committee structure, so when committees change, we refer to our map and say, "Here we go. This is what we are doing."

GM2: The golf course operation is the top priority. The members want to be most satisfied with the golf course. We have swimming, but that is seasonal. We have tennis, but that is a much smaller group. Food and beverage is a large portion of what we provide, but the golf course is the driving force and by far the one of

the two amenities most scrutinized by the members.

GM3: Golf is the largest membership class we have and the reason most people join our club. It ranks very high; however, we have seen over the past few years a growing interest in swimming, tennis, and junior programs, particularly children's activities. New members are making the decision to continue their membership because of the children's programs, swimming, and tennis. A lot of our younger families look at the golf experience as only one aspect of why they are here.

We are experiencing a shift in demographics. We have attracted many to the club right now in the 40- to 55-year-old range with young children. Our average golfer plays 20 rounds per year. This is not very much, compared to juniors who play a lot more, and if they are on the swim team, they are in the pool every single day. The golf course is important, but our other amenities are very valuable to our members.

GM4: The golf course is number one. Make no mistake about it, we were formed as a sporting and recreational club, and golf wasn't even in existence when we were formed. Golf has

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evolved and taken over as the number-one element of importance at our operation. This further heightens the importance of people like the superintendent and the golf professional because their roles are very important here.

When it comes to a governor's role, we try to explain to our leadership that we fully understand the importance of golf and the type of money we put into the golf operation. But when you sit at the board table, you must wear a generic governor's cap. Golf is important, but committee members must understand that we have many other constituents.

QUESTION #7 What percent of overall revenues (all inputs) is spent on golf course maintenance?

GM1: We are at about 18.7 percent of our total revenue for golf course maintenance.

GM2: Course maintenance expense is about 16.5 percent of all revenue.

GM3: Eighteen to 21 percent is spent on golf course maintenance.

GM4: Twelve percent of overall revenues is spent on golf maintenance.

QUESTION #8 Is there a defined protocol for handling member comments/complaints?

GM1: Our members can email the golf course superintendent or me directly. However, this has not been very successful. We have instructed our professionals and staff to engage the members and get their feedback. Staff then documents issues that need to be relayed to department heads. If it is something that needs to be addressed right away, then somebody contacts me and we contact the golf course superintendent or golf professional. We make sure an answer gets back to the right person promptly. If it is not a major issue, we discuss it at our weekly meetings.

We also have a very active green committee chairperson. He is in touch with the membership, gaining feedback, and the chairperson, superintendent, and I conduct infrequent meetings to handle pertinent issues.

The golf committee is active with the golf professional, so we get a lot of feedback through this committee, too. We have asked members who may not feel comfortable speaking to one of our staff to please communicate with the

appropriate committee members. Committee names are posted for this purpose.

GM2: We call them "constructive comments" and try not to say "complaints"; we try to keep it positive. We first take the comment to their department head, and then, if necessary, it is passed on to the chairperson or me.

The green committee does take part in this system. The golf course superintendent usually has a very close connection to the green chairperson. Not everything has to be blessed by the green committee; often, the superintendent can take care of the issue. If there is something that needs the attention of the full committee or board approval, it will move on to the appropriate level.

GM3: If a member has a complaint, he or she must submit it in writing, sign it, and present it to the general manager. The general manager will then present it to the grievance committee of the club. Our grievance committee defaults to the individual committees. So, if a member has a complaint about the facility, staff member, or another member, he or she is required to present it in writing and sign it before it is a recognized issue.

GM4: I often speak about "Expectations and Complaints." I am a believer that people have developed very high expectations of all services and facilities. At our facility, we need to discern between constructive criticism or feedback versus delivering a complaint. "Complaint" tends to take on a sour, negative tone, while "constructive criticism" or "feedback" takes on a more positive quality. A section of our member orientation program focuses on how to deal with or present constructive criticism.

If it is a real complaint, put it in writing. We do have committees, but if it is an issue of operations, we will deal with it on the departmental level. If it is an issue over rules or policies, then we will take it through a committee.

In a perfect world, all complaints are resolved and all parties are satisfied. However, this is seldom the result. It is my job to help the member understand how to deliver constructive comments and to feel it can be done immediately. We do not want issues to linger.

When it comes to course complaints, if it is unrealistic, then we have to deal with it before damage occurs. We use all our tools — newsletters, websites, and person-to-person conversations — to get the information out to golfers.

For example, we might have some ice damage on some of the greens. We state this is what it is, this is what caused it, and give us time; we as professionals are going to deal with the issues. We try to anticipate as much as possible. Many of the comments that come in are defused by saying, "Did you read the website?"

Golfers must know that we balance a budget, we determine the standards of a golf course, and we are constantly trying to work with Mother Nature. The superintendent is trying to manage controllable and uncontrollable variables. The

need to continuously inform and educate golfers, especially if they have a desire to fill a leadership role at the facility. The differences between governance and management must be constantly defined. Issues such as fairness of budgeting, labor allocation, communication, dealing with employee conflict, managing the committee structure, and operational governance must be openly discussed.

What makes an organization successful? These three department heads all have different levels of exposure to golfers' demands and comments.



The golf course superintendent is trying to manage both controllable and uncontrollable variables. The golf professional and the general manager are there supporting that individual.

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CONCLUSION

After examining the responses, several themes emerge. General managers who were queried all focused on developing a team approach to golfer satisfaction. This is accomplished by utilizing strong channels of communication to support the professionals in each department within the organization. The coaching and education efforts do not stop with the staff. There is a distinct

However, even during the most difficult times, working together is the one common thread that keeps the organization strong.

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