

“SOLE” SEARCHING

The value of having a truly integrated management team.

BY MARK A. BADO

Integrated management requires keeping a second pair of comfortable, all-weather shoes in the office so that the course can be seen from the superintendent’s “sole”!

The saying goes that “the grass is always greener . . .,” but do most general managers, chief operating officers, and park directors who oversee golf facilities truly understand why the grass at their courses is greener than ever before? In the same light, do course superintendents understand why the equipment can be replaced only on an eight-year rotation rather than every five years? They would, if a growing trend in the industry that relies on integrated management were embraced.

A LOOK BACK

Twenty years ago, I began my career in the golf industry as the controller and eventual interim manager at Oakmont Country Club in Pennsylvania. At that time, many neighboring facilities operated autocratically, i.e., the club manager ran the clubhouse, the golf professional managed the pro shop, and the superintendent oversaw the course. Things were different, however, at this historic club. Under the tutelage of General Manager Pat LaRocca, CCM, the concept of integrated management was introduced to the staff. By working closely with



Superintendent Mark D. Kuhns, CGCS, the clubhouse management staff gained a greater understanding of the priorities and challenges that Mark faced in his department. This management style was practiced not just during national championships and other high-profile events. Open communication became the standard mode of operations. Closed-door meetings and hidden agendas became things of the past. By literally putting on the shoes of the superintendent — to this day, I keep a pair of Timberlands in the office right next to my Cole Haans — the general manager created an open-door policy between two previously autonomous departments. As my experience has grown and I have worked at other golf facilities and gained increased responsibility, I have carried with me this idea of intertwining the knowledge of the clubhouse and grounds staffs through frequent and open communications.

ASSETS OF A GOLF FACILITY

At most golf facilities, the three main assets are the golfers or membership, the staff, and the property. As the golf course is the largest tangible asset, it is

pivotal to the success or failure of a facility’s operations. It is only common sense, then, that the golf course superintendent and his staff are included in the planning, budgeting, and golfer communications processes.

During my tenure at the Country Club of Peoria in Illinois, Andy Morris, golf course superintendent, enthusiastically supported the idea of a united effort. One afternoon while we were meeting, he mentioned that other superintendents wondered why information should be shared with the general manager or clubhouse staff. In further discussions, we both felt that not sharing information would be completely contrary to the success of the facility. We could accomplish more if each knew what the other was doing. An open-door policy was instituted so that all areas of the facility knew what was happening in the clubhouse, in the pro shop, and on the golf course. Andy was instrumental in keeping me up to date. As we continued our discussions, we learned that neither of us wants the other’s job, but we rely heavily on one another to do our jobs well.

An additional benefit from this form of management is the accuracy of the

budget, short-term planning, and long-range forecasting. In the case of a private facility, this would require the exchange of information between the general manager, the board of directors, and the superintendent in order to yield the best results. For the superintendent, understanding the importance of membership recruitment and retention helps relate census counts to the resulting cash flow for capital expenditures. In the same light, the general manager, with a greater vision of the daily needs and requirements of the

involving all managers of a club's operations in the planning and execution of long-range goals and budgets, the general manager, director, or chief operating officer can help ensure that all departments understand the scope of the projects and the time frame and budgetary constraints within which they need to be completed.

To illustrate this point, the Country Club of Peoria tried unsuccessfully for years to gain membership approval for a long-range plan that included replacing an antiquated, 75-year-old irriga-

with their approval, and the Country Club of Peoria finally passed long-range plans in 2007 and began the two-phase project later that year. None of this would have been possible if the clubhouse and grounds staffs had not coordinated their goals and ideas to present a unified proposal that encompassed all aspects of the operation from the planning to the execution to the grand reopening, scheduled for spring 2009. By utilizing outside professionals, such as our regional USGA agronomist, local banking executives, and noted golf course architects during the planning and presentation stages, we added validity to the proposal. In so doing, many of the emotions that oftentimes become part of the equation, especially if it had only been one of us making the recommendations to the board of directors, were left out.

STAFF BENEFITS

As a general manager, just saying that your door is always open to the grounds department does not necessarily yield improved operations. It is actions that speak volumes, not just words. One must actually go out onto the course, see the grounds staff working, and get to know them. For instance, every few weeks I make it a point to eat lunch with the grounds crew in the maintenance facility. In addition to these informal meals, the superintendent and I coordinate lunches to reward staff for various accomplishments. The accomplishments may include a successful opening day, completing snow removal before the Christmas formal dinner, or working overtime to aerate the greens before the weather turns. These seemingly simple and inexpensive gestures go a long way towards earning the respect and commitment of the staff, as well as increasing my understanding of the jobs that the crew perform each and every day.

I have also found that it is not enough to simply be visible to the grounds crew. Rather, the grounds



Integrated management builds strong working relationships between all department heads. Ultimately, this cooperation benefits golfers. Coordinating efforts for course enhancement through tree management at The Kansas City Country Club are (left to right) superintendent Loren Breedlove, general manager Mark Bado, and professional golfer Tom Watson, a member and course architect.

grounds operation, can be more accurate in his/her prioritization of funds expended for equipment, chemicals, manpower, etc. In essence, the general manager can then become the strongest advocate for the superintendent and his/her department.

GOLFER BENEFITS

The idea of working together also results in a more content, better-informed community of golfers. By

tion system. Finally, the management staff, including Superintendent Andy Morris, Golf Professional Scott Brownfield, and I, banded together and integrated our ideas. In so doing, we presented a united front in a more formal setting than had been done in the past.

Working as one, we detailed the project from start to finish. These efforts yielded a professional, yet personal approach. The members responded

crew must be visible to the golfers/membership as well. To that end, I invite the superintendent to be present at events, including the men's invitational dinner, the club holiday party, town hall meetings, and other facility-wide functions. By meeting and greeting the membership at these events, the superintendent gets to know the golfers for whom the course is maintained, and the golfers are able to put a face with the name, having seen and met the superintendent. If a facility takes advantage of the Turf Advisory Service offered by the USGA Green Section, this is also an excellent opportunity for the general manager, course officials, and superintendent to interact.

The true benefit of staff interactions comes when any problem arises, as people are much more likely to offer constructive criticism rather than personal attacks. Further benefits to having a personal connection with the superintendent can include a sense of job security and increased credibility when proposing changes or projects. By meeting and conversing with the superintendent, golfers gain a greater understanding of the expertise and valuable resource that these talented men and women offer. This would not be the first arena where mountains have been moved following an earlier introduction and handshake.

Equally important in fostering a quality staff is broadening their education. Throughout the year, I encourage the clubhouse management to attend at least one educational meeting held by an affiliated organization, such as the Club Managers Association of America (CMAA), Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), or the Professional Golfers Association of America (PGA of America). By attending one another's education sessions, we become aware of current trends, common concerns, and innovations that affect and inevitably increase efficiency in all areas of operation.



Working together as an integrated management team yields success when completing all of the necessary projects.

TAKE THE LEAP — REAP THE REWARDS

Every department is an integral part of the success of a golf facility. If one part fails, the entire machine cannot run as efficiently or effectively. Integrating departments may not always be easy and, as Andy Morris and I often noted, we do not always agree, but we can agree to disagree and look back later with a smile at the hurdles that have been cleared in making a facility better. In a time when many are looking to improve operations, increase efficiency, and elevate not only member and/or golfer satisfaction, but also staff morale, integrating the grounds operations into the everyday operations of the clubhouse is a logical, economical choice. There is no cost in visiting the maintenance facility and checking to see if things are on target, catching up on the latest issues with the crew, and letting them know that you are doing your due diligence to ensure that the membership and the board of directors support the grounds department in their efforts to help the facility realize its full potential.

I have witnessed firsthand the success of integrated management at

four golf facilities located in different geographic regions and with vastly different budgets. While it is no secret that we wear many hats in the industry, perhaps it is our shoe collection that we need to expand. Go ahead, take off those dress shoes and put on your boots. Take a walk with your superintendent and see the golf facility from his or her soles. Increased golfer/member satisfaction, more efficient and effective operations, and better trained/informed staff are well worth the extra time and effort. Remember, the general manager and golf course superintendent should be operating with the same goals, the same expectations, and the same tools.

MARK BADO, CCM, CCE, is an active USGA Green Section committeeman who has seen integrated management work successfully during his time at Oakmont Country Club in Oakmont, Pa.; Wildwood Golf Club in Allison Park, Pa.; and the Country Club of Peoria in Peoria Heights, Ill. Mark is currently employing this open communication style at The Kansas City Country Club in Mission Hills, Kans., where he serves as general manager/COO.