

Finding and Retaining Assistant Superintendents

How to fill one of the most important positions in golf course management.

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Assistant superintendents should be comfortable demonstrating leadership, accepting responsibility, determining daily work assignments, and supervising the staff.

The ebb and flow of the economy sometimes leads to labor shortages in the golf industry. In recent years it has been especially difficult to attract, hire, and retain assistant superintendents. This issue comes at a time when superintendents depend on their assistants more than ever to help share the workload and supervise employees. Furthermore, hiring and retaining the best people should always be a facility's top priority since employees are the foundation of an organization's success.

Traditionally, the position of assistant superintendent was an entry-level management job that was a steppingstone to eventually becoming a superintendent. However, changes in the golf industry have resulted in fewer available superintendent positions. Assistant superintendents now often spend longer periods of time in their role than they may have in the past. These and other factors may be contributing to a decline in turfgrass management programs and may have caused some

assistants to leave the golf course maintenance industry.

Facing a shortage of qualified assistants, superintendents and other golf facility decision-makers are more focused than ever on hiring and training assistant superintendents. This article explores how to identify the best assistant superintendent for your facility and includes suggestions for recruiting, training, retaining, and mentoring assistant superintendents.

WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM AN ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT?

Most job descriptions for an assistant superintendent broadly describe the role as assisting the superintendent in the planning and supervision of golf course maintenance activities. In actuality, the job can be as diverse as golf courses themselves. Identifying exactly what the superintendent and maintenance department want and need from an assistant superintendent will help guide the search process.

Here are some key considerations when hiring an assistant superintendent:

- Do you want a highly motivated candidate who eventually aspires to become a superintendent?
- Do you want a candidate who sees the assistant job as a long-term career?
- What critical roles — e.g., spray technician, irrigation technician, construction management, or leading special projects — will the assistant fill?
- Will the candidate be deeply involved in administration, planning, and paperwork or more focused on directing and supervising the staff?
- Is it important to have an assistant who complements the management style of the superintendent and offers skills that the superintendent may not have, such as being bilingual or being familiar with new technology?
- What are the expectations for hours and days worked?

The answers to these questions will help create an accurate job description

and guide the organization toward hiring an assistant superintendent who is a good fit — either as a career assistant or as an assistant who aspires to eventually become a superintendent.

Some golf course maintenance departments prefer an assistant superintendent who desires a long tenure with the facility. Such an arrangement can benefit the organization in many ways, including providing consistency and stability within the department and allowing the superintendent and assistant to develop a long-term working relationship. Stability also benefits the staff as they come to understand the assistant's management style and expectations. Over time, career assistants typically develop an extensive and beneficial knowledge of past maintenance practices and the property they manage.

Assistants with aspirations of becoming a superintendent may bring slightly different attributes to a facility. Aspiring superintendents often have or desire a formal agronomic education, want to be engaged with golfers and decision-makers at the facility, and are eager for responsibility and hungry for a mentor. Assistants who aspire to be superintendents may also be motivated by factors that fit a facility's needs and resources better, such as development and career advancement opportunities.

RECRUITING

Recruiting an assistant superintendent can be done in many ways, including the use of industry websites, local and national superintendents' association job boards, other online services, and through networking with other superintendents and industry personnel. Key attributes for potential candidates include:

- Good attitude and work ethic.
- Golf course work experience.
- Familiarity with the game of golf and course setup.
- Leadership potential.
- Willingness to accept increased responsibility.

Recruiting external candidates begins with the job posting. Along with including a detailed job description, mentioning the successful career pro-



Many assistant superintendents value coaching and feedback. Discussing projects in the field and exchanging ideas build valuable communication skills.

gression of past assistants can catch the eye of job seekers. Furthermore, outlining what a facility will do to train and develop the candidate shows potential applicants that the facility values their success.

Social media are being used more extensively to recruit job candidates. In 2016, approximately 65 percent of all Americans used social media regularly. Over half of those using social media have used it to look for a job or to inform a friend of a job opening.¹ Utilizing various social media platforms can expand the potential hiring pool by highlighting construction projects, the beauty of the golf course, and other positive aspects of a facility. Applicants may also view the golf facility as inviting and progressive if social media are regularly used.

The job interview is also an important process for vetting qualified applicants and showing them that the organization values great employees. If the interview only involves a brief office discussion and tour of the golf course, chances are that an assistant will not have had enough interaction with facility decision-makers. A more thorough interview that involves other managers and decision-makers not only makes good business sense, it sets the tone of the organization from the beginning. The ultimate goal when interviewing assistants should be to have them walking away from the

interview thinking that they can't afford to miss the opportunity to work at your facility.

Additional aspects of recruiting quality assistant superintendent candidates include the following:

Competitive Wages and Benefits:

One of the most important aspects of recruiting qualified assistant superintendents is offering a competitive compensation package. Appropriate compensation must account for what is being offered by both competing golf facilities and competing industries outside of golf. Data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers² show that the average bachelor's degree graduates from the class of 2014 earned 16 percent more during their first year on the job than the average assistant superintendent³. This discrepancy in compensation is an additional challenge for many facilities that desire an assistant superintendent with a college degree. Employees who are promoted to an assistant position from within the organization will also respond well to an increase in pay or a more consistent source of income.

Building a Pipeline: A demonstrated ability to help assistant superintendents advance to superintendent positions is probably the best method of attracting assistants who aspire to be superintendents. Aspiring superintendents are much more inclined to work for a facility that has a proven

track record of developing accomplished superintendents.

Providing a Suitable Workplace:

Although the overwhelming majority of an assistant superintendent's time is spent on the course, the conditions and accommodations of the maintenance facility can play a role in attracting assistant superintendents. There is no one-size-fits-all model for golf course maintenance facilities, but adequate, modern facilities share many common attributes as outlined in the USGA article "[What Makes a Good Maintenance Facility?](#)" Additionally, assistants should have a suitable office space equipped with the tools needed to perform their duties effectively.

Keep in mind that some of the best candidates might already be working on the maintenance staff. Some of the superintendents interviewed for this article mentioned a preference for promoting assistants from within and developing an internal pipeline for future assistants. This is a common strategy among golf course management companies, some of whom have internal training programs for developing assistant superintendents.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Assistant superintendent candidates bring a diverse range of backgrounds, skills, and work experiences to the job. Great leaders develop other individuals

into leaders. This requires, among other things, managing and training assistants on an individual basis to bring out the best in them. The first step in developing a personalized training program is to identify the candidate's strengths. What are they good at doing? What do they like doing and how does that benefit the facility? The next step is to identify weaknesses and areas where additional training is necessary. Investing the time and resources to develop assistants so they can reach their career goals is critical to keeping them engaged and contributing to the success of the facility.

Assistant superintendents must develop a wide range of skills to be successful in their role or as a superintendent in the future. Along with agronomic training, they should receive administrative training and practice interacting with golfers and decision-makers in social settings. Effective communication, problem-solving, and collaboration with golfers, committee members, department managers, and other stakeholders are essential skills for successful assistants and superintendents. Helping assistants develop these skills will improve their performance and demonstrate that the facility is committed to their success. Ultimately, an assistant superintendent should be able to tell a prospective employer that he or she has practical experience in every aspect of being a

superintendent. Training and development programs should focus on three main areas:

Professional Development:

Assistants should be exposed to many different aspects of agronomic and personnel management. They should have opportunities to create and manage technical tasks such as irrigation scheduling and pesticide applications. They should also gain experience scheduling and training staff. Assistant superintendents should have opportunities to take advantage of the increasing number of resources for continuing education and training, including traditional university and community college programs as well as online and 10-week winter programs focused on golf course management. Some facilities offer to pay for schooling in exchange for a commitment that the assistant will work at the golf course for a negotiated period of time. Allowing the assistant to attend local and national superintendents' association meetings and networking events is another great benefit to provide.

Administrative Development:

Golf course superintendents are directly or indirectly involved in many of the decisions at a golf facility. Training assistant superintendent to handle administrative duties provides opportunities to learn from other facility personnel and broadens their perspective of the entire facility. This cross-training also helps the superintendent by offering an extra layer of protection should the superintendent be absent when an important situation arises with another department.

Familiarity with other departments also makes the assistant more marketable to other facilities in the future. During future job interviews, assistants should be able to describe how they helped create budgets, managed payroll, interacted with salespeople and performed the many other administrative tasks that superintendents perform. Superintendents and other facility personnel should help assistants develop a well-rounded resume and hone their interview skills before they begin applying for superintendent jobs. Competition for superintendent jobs can be fierce, so preparation is important.



An ongoing commitment to professional development helps assistant superintendents build technical expertise and provides opportunities to network with peers.



Assistant superintendents can offer valuable insight when superintendents face challenges. Superintendents should encourage thoughtful dialogue with their assistants.

Social Development: Superintendents must have good interpersonal skills to communicate effectively with customers, salespeople, and facility decision-makers. Any facility presents numerous situations where a superintendent's communication and social skills are put to the test. Whether responding to a golfer's questions about the putting greens, participating in green committee meetings over dinner, or golfing with the ladies' golf league, superintendents must be experienced with clearly and effectively addressing multiple audiences. Proper training in these situations is best achieved through experience.

Provide opportunities for assistant superintendents to be included in meetings with golf professionals, green committees, and other key facility personnel. Assistants aspiring to become superintendents should be given opportunities to present to facility decision-makers, conduct meetings with managers, and regularly interact with golfers. These situations will prepare them for being a superintendent. Involving assistants in creating blogs, newsletters, and social media posts is a great way to give them additional responsibility and offer a feeling of contribution to the organization.

RETENTION

Assistant superintendents, like all employees, want an enjoyable place to

work. Golf facilities that have a good reputation will generally have an easier time attracting and retaining good employees. Generally, it is equally important that the superintendent has a reputation for treating people fairly and creating a positive work environment. Good employees not only want to work for good organizations, they want to work for good supervisors. Employee retention depends on many factors, but it is important to find out first what motivates each individual. While pay and benefits are primary factors, many assistants get into the golf business because they like to work outdoors or enjoy playing golf. There may be other factors such as being close to family or enjoying the culture and camaraderie at the golf course that make the job attractive for an assistant.

Unfortunately, many factors are making it difficult to find and retain assistant superintendents. Arguably the biggest factor is the fact that job openings for superintendent positions are not as prevalent as they once were. In many cases, this has resulted in prolonged tenures as an assistant and potential frustration for those aspiring to be superintendents. To offset this issue, facilities should focus on making assistants feel valued by providing a healthy work and life balance and advocating for their success if they choose to apply for

superintendent positions. Managing to each employee's needs is important because no two employees are the same. Key factors that contribute to successful retention include:

Quality of Life: As assistants spend a longer time in their role, they likely place more value on work and life balance. Offering a competitive compensation package is important, but it can only do so much. Continuous stress from long, hard workweeks will eventually lead to burnout for even the most eager and driven assistant. Managing a healthy work and life balance is difficult when working 80 hours per week. Long hours and a lack of personal time are proving to be major catalysts for assistants seeking jobs outside of the golf course maintenance industry. A growing number of facilities are recognizing this issue and are creating either flexible workweeks or guaranteed regular time off.

Responsibility: In an industry where things can quickly go wrong, it can be difficult to delegate responsibility to a new assistant. However, giving assistants responsibility and opportunities to make critical decisions makes them better leaders and helps them feel as though they are contributing to the organization. An easy way to give assistants more responsibility is to put them in charge of a special project that aligns with their strengths. As they prove they can effectively tackle these

projects, move them into situations that test their weaknesses and offer opportunities for development. As long as the risk is minimized, don't be afraid to let assistants make mistakes from which they can learn.

Communication and Guidance:

Coaching and a culture of feedback are essential to develop high-performing teams. It is important for the superintendent to share information about the facility's goals and objectives and discuss how the assistant plays a role in the success of the operation.

Regularly provide honest feedback on things that are going well and on things that could be improved. Quarterly meetings to assess progress are not the only vehicle through which to deliver feedback. Providing instant, on-the-fly feedback as situations arise presents the opportunity to transfer valuable guidance during the development process.

CONCLUSION

Finding and retaining the assistant superintendent who is best for a particular golf facility depends on several factors. A critical first step is developing a clear job description that details the role and duties the assistant will fulfill. This will guide whether the facility should seek a long-term assistant or a candidate with a shorter tenure who aspires to become a superintendent.

Recruiting quality candidates can be done in several ways; the way that works best will largely depend on the type of assistant desired. Social media are playing a larger role in job searches and attracting candidates. Also, having a track record of former assistants who have moved on to successful careers as superintendents can be an important asset for hiring assistants who



Giving assistants important responsibilities, such as determining daily job assignments, is important to their professional development and job satisfaction.

aspire to become superintendents. An established record of developing assistants into superintendents can be attractive to candidates who seek the mentoring and support they need to advance in their careers. For courses seeking a career assistant, sometimes the best candidates are already on the staff and will just need some training and support to move into the role.

Retaining good assistants in a tight labor market can be challenging. Offering competitive wages and benefits is important. Moreover, golf courses that have a reputation for treating people fairly and providing a good work environment generally have an easier time attracting and retaining employees, regardless of market forces. Mentoring and supporting employees is another important aspect of retention that requires superintendents and managers to find out what motivates individuals and then give them the training and support they need to be successful.

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