

Defining a Cutting-Edge Superintendent

The top ten characteristics of today's cutting-edge golf course superintendent.

BY BOB BRAME

The title attached to the person charged with the maintenance of the golf course has changed over the years. The age-old title of *greenkeeper* still has strong historic ties, but *turf manager*, *grounds manager*, *director of grounds*, and others have all been applied. The most common today, however, is *golf course superintendent*. While a job description or employment contract should be in place to guide the specifics, what is the definition of today's golf course superintendent — a *cutting-edge* golf course superintendent? That question is the focus of this article.

The primary objectives behind defining a cutting-edge golf course superintendent are twofold: (1) to provide a tool for existing superintendents and those hoping to be superintendents, and (2) to provide a guide for courses to consider when looking for an individual to direct the maintenance of their primary asset. This article is a joint effort of the USGA Green Section staff. The staff brings to the table years of golf course maintenance experience and thousands of site visits to courses. Each staff member submitted a list of the top ten characteristics of a cutting-edge golf course superintendent. The listing was then compiled to determine both the top ten characteristics and their prioritization, based on the number of times each characteristic was suggested by the staff. The following are the suggested top ten characteristics of a cutting-edge golf course superintendent, in ascending order.

10 – GIVER. A cutting-edge golf course superintendent volunteers for and participates on committees and other golf industry-related activities, over and above those directly tied to work responsibilities. There is



Positioning key dates for upcoming maintenance activities on a master board keeps the mechanic and assistants informed.

consistent support for local and national superintendent associations, along with golf associations and other allied groups. Apart from the golf industry, the superintendent supports and participates in community activities. There is a sharp understanding of the importance to guard family and personal time away from the job and golf industry. Interests and hobbies outside of golf provide diversion and perspective.

9 – GOLFER. Without exception, a cutting-edge golf course superintendent plays golf regularly — on the course

he or she is responsible for maintaining and others. The skill level or handicap is secondary to regular participation. Time spent playing the course being maintained is counted as work time — a direct component of properly doing the job. The superintendent has a historical and present-day understanding of the game and a working knowledge of the Rules of Golf, and he or she can relate to the players' perspective when fielding questions and developing communications. Course maintenance and scheduling reflects its ultimate purpose — preparing the golf course for golf.



Communication involves creativity and interaction. Reviewing details of the operation has more value when combined with a tour.

8 – LEARNER. A cutting-edge superintendent is continuously open to learning new things and understands there is always more to learn. This journey is experienced by regularly attending conferences and other educational opportunities with an open eagerness, while also reviewing articles, university research and digital media from credible sources to gather new information.

7 – RESOURCE MANAGER. Cutting-edge superintendents fully understand the value and importance of the assets they are responsible for managing. He or she encourages and guides the establishment of maintenance standards — a detailed maintenance program that fits the facility's available resources and golfer expectations. In conjunction, a realistic budget is developed and followed. The superintendent also should perform labor and time studies to maximize efficiency and sustainability, while proactively applying any needed adjustments. A valuable role is continually monitoring the maintenance infrastructure (irrigation system, drainage, equipment inventory, maintenance complex, and course architecture to the extent that it creates maintenance costs beyond the available resources) and offers recommendations for improvements. A cutting-edge superintendent also guides long-range

improvement planning and the establishment of an architect-driven master plan, if needed.

6 – SEEKS COUNSEL. A cutting-edge superintendent openly admits to not having all the answers and, as such, does not have a “know it all” attitude. Job expectations often make it difficult to visit other courses, especially during the golf season, but regularly talking with trusted individuals

can improve perspective. Recognizing the value of on-site consultation was a key reason why the USGA expanded the Green Section's program back in 1953 to the current Turf Advisory Service. Cutting-edge superintendents are not threatened by trusted professional counsel — quite the opposite. They are proactive in seeking professional assistance, as opposed to waiting until there is a problem before reaching out. Audubon International is another available resource used by those who are open to outside professional counsel.

5 – AGRONOMIST. A cutting-edge superintendent applies research-based and proven practices. There is a careful and continual guarding of the primary building blocks (1. water management = drainage/aeration + irrigation/rainfall, 2. growing environment = sunlight and air movement, 3. fertilization = anchored on regular soil testing, and 4. mowing = type of mower, bench setting, and cutting quality) ahead of secondary agronomics.

As an example, this means a superintendent understands that pesticide applications, which are secondary, will have more value when all of the building blocks are properly addressed and



The superintendent and assistants must communicate regularly and in detail for everyone to be working toward the same goals.

working together to maximize plant health. They will have a detailed understanding of the irrigation system and the importance of implementing hand watering to enhance pushing toward the dry end of the continuum. The cutting-edge superintendent is a good water manager and trains others to do the same.

While science and research-based practices are important to a superintendent, there is also a working realization that golf turf management is both science and art. Through the never-ending weave of agronomics, economics, and politics, there is a priority focused on maximizing the operation's environmental sustainability.

site-specific verification. Control plots on a representative turf nursery will be used to evaluate and cross-compare prior to usage on in-play areas. Site-specific verification will trump utilizing new products based on testimonials alone. The "please me now," instant gratification culture we live in is carefully filtered. There is a real world application of the adage "the only thing that happens fast in agriculture is crop failure." A cutting-edge superintendent uses technology to the maximum advantage, but avoids over-complication.

3 – GOOD COMMUNICATOR.

Good listening is the prerequisite to being a good communicator. This short poem sums it up nicely.

October 1992 *Green Section Record*), the number-one pitfall of golf course maintenance was identified to be "communication and public relations." Most would agree that this has not changed; if anything, it has become more pointed. So it's not surprising that in 2011 our staff identified being a "good communicator" as one of the most important characteristics of a cutting-edge superintendent. Communicating well with all types of personalities is vitally important to being a successful superintendent.

Engaging, positive, proactive, creative, and respectful are encompassed in a cutting-edge superintendent's communication. A whining demeanor squelches the words being



Speaking to juniors about the maintenance operation improves their awareness and subsequent care of the course.

4 – KNOWLEDGEABLE AND EXPERIENCED. Educated and tested, well-informed and seasoned — a cutting-edge superintendent is knowledgeable and does not necessarily hold one specific degree, but is informed, educated, and experienced. This does not require a specific number of years, but time in the field is essential. Good common sense will be used to weave facts with real world application. Mistakes are a reality, but a cutting-edge superintendent is quick to learn from mistakes.

Innovative thinking is an important trait. Hearing "we've never done it like that before" doesn't prevent the superintendent from moving forward and thinking outside the box. There is an openness to new products, but, at the same time, a bit of caution and investigation will prevail until there is

*A wise old owl lived in an oak.
The more he saw the less he spoke.
The less he spoke the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?*

We've all talked with someone and, because of their body language or verbal response, it was clear they didn't hear a word. It's frustrating and rude. Understandably, no one wants to have their efforts to communicate met with indifference. So it becomes really simple; if we want to be heard, we must first hear — really hear — what is being said. This cannot be done while texting, reviewing email, or talking to someone else on the phone or two-way radio. Listening involves setting everything else aside and focusing completely on the one speaking.

In the article "[The Ten Pitfalls of Golf Course Maintenance](#)" (September/

spoken. A good communicator stays positive even when shrouded in difficulty and stress, and he or she addresses concerns before they become overpowering or emotional by interacting with appropriate people.

2 – PROFESSIONAL. There are appropriate times to use a cell phone and times to turn it off. Those who can't easily determine which is which are not professional. A professional is a well-mannered individual who makes those around him or her feel important and respected.

A cutting-edge superintendent will do what he says he'll do when he says he'll do it. Being on time, following through, displaying strong organizational skills and attention to detail are all evident in the individual. Leading by example, a professional superintendent does not drive by a carelessly



No one likes to see dead grass, but having a Green Section agronomist review the site-specific details with members of the committee helps communicate the correct information as opposed to hearsay.



Teaching the art of hand watering/syringing is a positive step toward a healthier and more dependable golf course.

tossed piece of trash or an overturned trash can.

Cutting-edge superintendents are multitaskers when necessary and singularly focused when needed — they work hard and smart. Sorting out the best strategy to address a challenge comes naturally from experience. Often, they are trendsetters.

It is important to stay out of the golf course politics. They know the golf course is not theirs, and, as such, follows the leadership's directive, while also providing counsel that guards the operation's best interest.

The solid verbal, written, and computer skills of a cutting-edge superintendent are flavored with a good sense of humor. Knowing that Murphy's Law sometimes kicks in despite good planning and execution, a good laugh can clear the air and set the stage for regrouping.

1 – PEOPLE PERSON/MANAGER.

A cutting-edge superintendent is fair, consistent, and patient with the staff. Fair involves treating all employees like the superintendent would like to be treated. Be straightforward and acknowledge that some jobs are less enjoyable, but no one is asked to do a

job that the superintendent wouldn't do. The system of assigning jobs should be understood by all and consistently applied. The standards used to evaluate an employee's work and the finished product are the same for all employees, relative to their experience level. Have a patient demeanor with employees without settling for substandard work or compromising needed efficiency. Be respectful with all employees, even when a reprimand is necessary.

Teaching and training employees is detailed and comprehensive when coming from a cutting-edge superintendent. Encouragement and motivation are woven with fairness, patience, and consistency. The person has a built-in ability to identify good people to hire, which ultimately streamlines management moving forward.

A cutting-edge superintendent is a good delegator. The maintenance operation doesn't require his or her continual presence to run smoothly. There is a fundamental desire to mentor and assist others with their careers and life in general. The individual has a strong support network within the industry.

CONCLUSION

Cutting edge is clearly well above average or good. There are a lot of good superintendents who possess some of the identified traits, but bringing them all together is ultimately what *cutting edge* is all about. It is something to strive for, but it will take focus, effort, time, and experience. The designation *cutting-edge superintendent* is a distinction for those who are truly at the top of the class — for those who are on the *cutting edge of their profession*.

REFERENCES

[Brame, Bob. September/October 1992 Green Section Record, 'The Ten Pitfalls of Golf Course Maintenance,' TGIF # 25052.](#)

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