

Managing people is like managing grass, and...

Very rarely does just one thing kill the grass!

BY SCOTT WAHLIN, CGCS

Don Shula's Hotel and Golf Club

Several years ago, a buddy of mine told me a story about a superintendent who was fired because he came in at 9 o'clock on a Monday morning. My friend said that the owner of the club was running around all upset because there were worms on the greens and the person he had hired to assure the health of this investment was nowhere to be found.

I told my friend that I doubted very seriously that he was fired for only one incident. I think it is much more likely that this individual superintendent had dropped the ball on other occasions and this had made the owner finally come to the conclusion that this is it—he had had enough!

It seems to me that many times we try to fabricate easy excuses for failure when there were actually many different situations that led to our lack of success.

I personally have fired employees for being five minutes late. This may seem harsh but, believe me, there was a lot more to it than just one tardiness.

While touring the golf course in the morning, I look for many things. One thing that is easy to spot in the morning is sprinkler heads that are not turning. Normally you will have a green stripe with heavy dew while the dew in the surrounding area is slight.

If I have someone who I am trying to train, I will call them over to show them how to spot and repair a sprinkler head that is not turning. I park the cart outside the area and walk in with the trainee. I show them how to disassemble and troubleshoot the head. We then turn it on to check our work and irrigate the area.

A day or two later I take them back to

the same area to show them how the grass died in the areas where we walked. I explain that, at that point in time, the turf was so stressed that the only thing needed to kill it was the weight of our feet.

I use this story to graphically illustrate to problem employees how close they have come to failure. I do not fire people for being five minutes late, but people who work for me can put themselves in a position where coming in five minutes late will result in termination of their employment. There is a difference.

Supervising golf maintenance employees is a challenge at best.

Factors affecting proper supervision are stacked against the golf maintenance supervisor especially if you consider these against a supervisor in a factory situation: the capabilities and compensation of the employees, the variety of tasks performed, the size of the area where the work is performed and the expected standards.

Many times it is impossible to closely monitor the productivity of an individual or work crew. As a result, we have to make determinations based on what we can see.

If I check on an employee four times in a day and he is not working two of those times, this may be a coincidence. If this trend continues, I do not have the time or inclination to assume that this is purely coincidence.

If this situation occurs I give the employee an oral warning and explain the difficulties in supervising golf maintenance employees. Many times they will protest saying that I saw them the only times they stopped working. I explain that Joe is working virtually every time I see him and I never see his machine parked at the halfway house 15 minutes before lunch. I also say that this is a business like

any other and sometimes difficult decisions have to be made.

If I fire 100 employees in my career and 10 of those were actually good employees, I still got rid of 90 bad ones. How many business decisions do you get where you have a 90% chance of being correct?!

Of course there are times when one situation can kill grass, get you fired or ruin the aesthetically pleasing appearance we are trying to create. To illustrate this I create the following situation and physically show it to the crew.

I set up the hole running near the maintenance building so that there is not one leaf out of place. Just prior to meeting with the crew, I peg a styrofoam cup down to the fairway with a tee. Without fail, every golfer who drives by looks at the cup.

I explain to the crew all the work, planning and effort that went in to preparing that hole. I tell them about all the things they did to create this perfect hole. "Here we have a perfect hole with one 'wart' and what are our customers looking at?" If I am having trouble getting the crew to pick up trash on the course, I also point out how unlikely it is that every golfer will look at a piece of trash while every maintenance worker will miss it!

I bet you thought when you read the title to this that I was going to write about shade, mowing heights, nematodes and the like. And, in a way, I am except I am relating stresses to human relations.

Shade may be equivalent to poor communication, mowing heights to watching the clock, and nematodes to a general lack of vigor or attitude. When dealing with others, just like in turfgrass, it is important that we maximize the positive so that we can endure some of the negative.