



Tales From The Other Side of the Desk

BY ROBERT G. KLITZ, CGCS

Orangebrook Country Club

Recently, several golf course superintendents in Florida have accepted the challenge of becoming a general manager. Geoff Coggan, CGCS at the Great Outdoors in Titusville and Mark Richard, CGCS at the Fort Walton Beach Golf Club are two former South Florida Chapter members who have moved into managing the operations of their respective clubs. Was the CGCS behind each of our names one of the reasons we were selected for these positions? Good question. Delicate subject.

As a golf course superintendent, I wondered what the next step would be after becoming certified. My position as general manager was not a position that I was seeking, but rather one that I was selected for based on the skills that I had developed and displayed as a professional in a management position. If you are currently working as a golf course superintendent and apply for a job as general manager at another club, your chances of receiving an interview are probably slim. Most superintendents have made the progression from superintendent to general manager at the club where they are currently working.

What exactly are the general manager skills that an employer is looking for? The most important skills would have to be the ability to communicate and deal with people. When I was job hunting, I went on an interview for a golf course superintendent's position at a very impressive facility in Boca Raton.

The director of golf operations was surprised that I was outgoing, and that we were engaged in comfortable, intelligent and articulate conversation. He mentioned that most of the superintendents he knew appeared to be more comfortable talking to turtles on the golf course instead of communicating with their members, customers or co-workers. Although this gentleman's comment was funny at the time, it was also disturbing. How can superintendents overcome this

Superintendent reflects upon transition from superintendent to general manager.

stereotype and continue to develop necessary skills while battling this perception?

The "turtle type" superintendent would have some difficulty stepping into the role of general manager. Resolving crisis situations like the smoothing of many ruffled feathers, and the handling of virtually all delicate issues are typically handled by the GM. How do you as a superintendent develop those kind of interpersonal skills?

There are several options for learning new skills or strengthening old ones. The GCSAA offers communication seminars at the national conference and a local presentation can be arranged at the chapter level. Local workshops that teach these skills are available through community colleges, independent seminars put on by Skillpath and Fred Pryor Seminars and some local businesses.

Another method of learning these techniques in a "hands on" environment is to become more active at your own club. Whether you are an assistant or a superintendent you can still play golf with your members, or regular customers and start to develop relationships with some of these people one-on-one.

Be prepared for some criticism and react positively. The people you interact with may be harboring five years of frustration over various golf course issues. They will unload on you, because no one else ever took the time to listen. As you feel the hair on your neck stand up in defiance to the criticism, smile and take notes. Reply positively and openly, and try to take action on their suggestions and comments. Suppose they point out that the mirror in the restroom on the 12th hole was broken four years ago and never replaced, and then they see that it is repaired the next time they play golf. You

may have won a friend for life.

Attending club committee meetings, club golf outings and functions at your course is another way of becoming involved with your membership. Through active engagement in discussion and conversation over club issues, you will project your interest and concern regarding the property and the golf course conditions. Volunteer to serve on a long-range planning committee to not only enter your input regarding future goals, but to further your relationship with some key people at your club. Through these professional interactions your ability to work with and understand your membership will contribute to your overall goal of developing your communications skills.

An obvious way to expand your skills needed as a general manager candidate is to become actively involved in your golf course superintendents' associations. Your involvement at the local chapter, state and national levels helps your association and profession move forward and helps you develop skills and contacts that will benefit you throughout your career.

Volunteering to serve on various committees and as an officer will teach you to look at the big picture on issues. You will learn how to conduct meetings, mobilize and direct resources and see how various clubs operate by helping to secure and schedule meeting sites and educational speakers. All of these association experiences will develop your written and oral skills and provide you with insights helpful for club organization and operations.

One of the more challenging relationships is the one between golf course maintenance and golf operations. Through all of the overlapping responsibilities, occasional conflicts of interest, and a variety of other issues, this is the most important, and sometimes the most strained relationship in the club operation. Your goal, as a general manager candidate, should be to enhance your knowledge and understanding of the golf operation.

This increased exposure will help you prepare for the massive operational responsibilities without going through a

traumatic culture shock later. There are a multitude of issues a golf professional handles daily from cashier drawers being short \$50, scoring that 150-man shotgun tournament, stocking merchandise, handling a screwed-up tee time, booking functions, soothing irate members. As superintendents, we may not feel these things are important as we deal with our own problems, but they are part of the total club experience for the members.

One of the most enlightening experiences I have had in learning golf operations is to operate the pro shop counter or cash register for several hours one day a week. This helped me maintain an open relationship with my customers, and keeps me in tune with my cashiers' operational challenges. Members and customers feel comfortable discussing their concerns and comments in the pro shop environment. This may sound like a crazy idea for a golf course superintendent to try the same thing at their club, but give it some thought.

The golf professional should enjoy your support. He will get part of a shift covered at no additional expense to the operation. Someone trustworthy will be behind the counter. A knowledgeable person will be answering all questions about course conditions intelligently.

The benefits for the superintendent will be an understanding of how valuable the pro shop staff can be in explaining challenges you face on the course. You will see how many phone calls the staff handles regarding greens conditions, aerification and overseeding. You will hear most conversations with the staff are not about golf clubs and balls but about cart path rules, green speeds and broken locks on restroom doors. After this experience you will not only realize that you need to update the staff on course conditions more frequently, but that you have a large group of people to add to your Christmas list.

Another area that some golf course

superintendents have limited experience with is the golf car fleet. Although it looks fairly simple to train someone to wash off a cart, park it and plug it in, there are many more details that need to be addressed. Servicing batteries, reporting damage from customers, repairing flat tires, waxing, detailing, greasing and reporting mechanical problems. All of these issues have to be addressed, implemented and documented. Talk to your golf professional about his/her program. You may learn something you can utilize in your own operation.

The financial knowledge required for the general manager's position will probably be the most difficult information for the typical golf course superintendent to learn. The GCSAA offers financial management seminars, and a manual is available for studying for the CGCS exam. Neither of those resources is going to give you a complete understanding of the financial systems in use at your club.



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Some clubs discuss the current financial picture with their department heads at weekly staff meetings. This discussion typically describes how the revenue from the previous week compares to the expenses of the maintenance and clubhouse and pro shop operations. A day or two of bad weather will cause some long faces in the staff meeting.

Some clubs will share a report of only the maintenance expenses with the superintendent. If you want to become more aware of the club's total financial picture, ask the general manager if this information could be included at the staff meetings. If that isn't feasible ask if you could be copied with the information or if he would go over it with you on a regular basis. Either way, as you review the weekly figures, you should develop a greater un-

derstanding of the financial picture of the club and the impact your actions as superintendent has on the overall operation.

One of the most challenging aspects of the transition from golf course superintendent to general manager is the relationship between the new GM and his/her new superintendent. If the new GM is promoting his/her old assistant to the position, the transition should go smoother. But now, as the new GM, how do you restrain yourself when your new superintendent wants to try a technique that is different from anything you would have done as superintendent? Do you bite your tongue and let the "rookie" trip and fall and learn from the school of hard knocks, or do you delicately point out how the "new" idea might cause prob-

lems and how your "old" way would provide better results? This relationship can be one of the toughest to handle in your new GM position.

In August 1997, David Lottes, vice president of Southern Golf Appraisals, interviewed me for the position of general manager at Orangebrook Country Club. During the interview David stated that the general manager's position presents a new and challenging situation every day. As a golf course superintendent I was used to facing challenges and obstacles on a regular basis. I had to learn the skills of an agronomist, environmental steward, equipment operator, mechanic, plumber, electrician, spray technician, carpenter, painter, family counselor and mediator.

As a general manager I have had to expand my horizons to include knowledge of janitorial services, air conditioning service, alarm systems, video surveillance systems, exterior high intensity lighting for the driving range, telephone systems, voice mail systems, ball dispensing machines, credit card validators, disputed credit card charges, proper cash handling techniques, golf merchandising and displays, inventory control, cash register programming, tee time reservation systems and numerous other unfamiliar tasks.

As golf course superintendents, some of us will be provided with the opportunity to move into a general manager's position. This will be a challenging task for most superintendents. But with the skills you have mastered and displayed in organizational ability and staff management, an owner should be able evaluate your competency prior to placing you in this new position. Making the move to general manager may seem a daunting task. By preparing now for this future opportunity, your transition into this new role can be as smooth as your best putting green.

Editor's Note: Robert G. Klitz, CGCS is the general manager for Golf Hollywood, a golf-course management company that is currently managing three facilities for the City of Hollywood.

Attitude Check

You know you are a general manager and no longer a superintendent when....

You are driving to work in a heavy rain, and you are no longer thinking about if you have enough car wax to keep the crew busy waxing equipment, but you start thinking "There goes \$10,000 in revenue."

When customers are complaining about: Food quality in the restaurant. The air conditioner leaked in the merchandise storage room ruining your winter stock. A customer wants their emergency room medical bill covered from when they were hit in the head by a golf ball on the driving range. You long for the days when all you had to do was remind your guys to check the oil in the greens mowers.

You are worried about making sure all the driving range balls are picked up before golf course maintenance starts mowing.

You no longer are asked to lunch by your turf sales reps.

You no longer put on sunscreen at 4:30 am after you brush your teeth.

You wear nicer shoes to work (but you keep your boots under your desk)

You very rarely get caught in a rainstorm.

You still carry a pocket knife(not in a belt holster): but it is now used for opening mail and packages; rarely gets to cut a weed out of a green; and never gets to cut irrigation hydraulic tubing anymore.

You think a lot more about beautifying the Clubhouse landscaping, instead of thinking of it is an afterthought and a nuisance.

You still drive a pick-up truck, but it stays a lot cleaner.

The smell of gear oil, hydraulic fluid, and diesel fuel has been replaced by the aroma of copy machine toner, cigars and perfume.

You can no longer postpone a haircut by wearing a hat for two weeks.

You wake up in the middle of the night, with rain pounding on your bedroom window, hoping you will be able to let carts out in the morning, instead of wondering if your assistant turned off the irrigation before he went home.