From Art to Science

Mark My Words

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I'd like to add my two cents to the management-company controversy, which is about a nickel more than it's worth.

As I see it, management companies are a natural by-product of the evolution of the golf course maintenance industry, and technology is the catalyst. The "art and science of greenkeeping" began a shift in emphasis from mostly "art" to mostly "science" during the 60s thanks to television's coverage of golf's finest venues. Golfers' higher expectations set in motion the irresistible forces of technological innovation which began the transformation of "greenkeepers" into professional golf course superintendents. The coming of age of the environmental movement during this same period accelerated the pace of this transformation, as targets were placed on golf courses as enemies of "the environment." Turfgrass programs around the country proliferated and the curriculum became more technical and scientific.

As a golf course superintendent whose career has spanned more than 26 years, I can attest to our profession's technical evolution and an acceleration in this rate of change. Golf course superintendents as a group are extremely knowledgeable, dedicated, and innovative, but the diversity of disciplines for which we're now accountable makes it impossible to be proficient in all of them. Superintendents are not all cut from the same cloth. It has been my observation that most have strong agronomic backgrounds, but from there the diversity of talent branches off in many directions. Some of us are excellent with people, some have mechanical aptitudes, some have design skills, some are horticultural geniuses… it depends on the superintendent's training, personality, and personal interests. Job security and survival, however, depend upon the golf facility's wants and needs, and their perception of the superintendent's ability to provide for and satisfy those wants and needs.

Management companies have recognized and capitalized on this reality. The legitimate ones offer a diverse pool of expertise that can be applied in an efficacious manner to more than one facility. This is the theory, anyway, and it can work at the low-end club without a qualified superintendent, and the high-end club whose qualified superintendent cannot meet all the club's expectations. Most superintendents, naturally, would prefer that the club allow him to hire a qualified staff and utilize contract services to fulfill all requirements, but that decision is out of his hands. It really doesn't matter whether it was a sound decision or not at this stage.

There are a few things a superintendent can do to protect his job:

1) Keep all senses attuned to your club's needs and develop strong lines of communication with the decision makers. As Dan Jones was fond of saying, "You've got to give them what they want even if they don't know what that is."

2) Take advantage of educational opportunities that are pertinent to your club's particular needs and that address your personal deficiencies. Prove to your club that you are a valuable asset in many diverse fields and they will find it difficult to seek your replacement. Note that the larger management companies require attendance by their superintendents at educational venues like chapter meetings and FTGA conference and show.

3) Support those trade organizations like FGCSA and FTGA that support university research, as they are the ones most likely to develop products and practices to save your club money. Economics may not be the reason for all decisions to switch to a management company, but it is at the heart of most of them.

Management companies are not a passing fad or a blip on the radar screen — they are a reality of golf course maintenance moving into the new millennium. You can fight them, join them, or coexist with them — just think long and hard about your strategy. Just remember that General Custer thought he had those Indians right where he wanted them just before the battle of the Little Bighorn!