

Conditioning Your Management Skills

By Pat Jones

I gave Dr. Ken Middaugh, one of the Wake Forest University business experts who help teach the annual Syngenta Business Institute, a very simple request: Name five things every superintendent can do to improve his or her management skills now. Here is his very sophisticated answer to that simple request:

1. Build or strengthen your team.

Your team is more than just your direct reports. You should think about all the folks with whom you interact every day to get your job done. In other words, your team is the group you collaborate with to do the job and that needs to be broadly defined. What you do impacts what the golf professional does and both of you impact what the GM does.

Next, think about how you're going to lead that team. One of the adages in management literature has to do with "Theory X managers vs. Theory Y managers." Theory X managers are people who believe that employees are nails and they're the hammer. They treat their team as unmotivated cogs in the machine and believe constant control is necessary.

Theory Y managers believe that most employees are self-motivated and want to do well. The challenge for them is to state clear outcomes, direct and guide.

Despite what you might think, Y-managed teams universally outperform those run by X-types.

People do not respond well over a long time to constant control and micromanaging. That's hard for some superintendents because they're frontline managers and their first instinct might be to tell employees what to do. Sometimes you have to instruct them – as with a safety issue or a regulated issue or an employee who is untrained or misguided – but mostly you should avoid it. Also, the management vs. labor issue – Expect respect... but build a team to get to know people.

Familiarity does not breed contempt. It builds knowledge and relationships that help you get the most from employees. Plus you're willing to do more and perform better for someone you like and respect, rather than someone you just fear. Break down the barrier. You don't need to have them over to your house, but get to know them; know about their families, likes and dislikes, etc. All of that strengthens your team.

2. Motivate your team.

What's a simple or low-cost approach? Recognition. When someone does something good – not even extraordinary – make sure they know you're pleased. Doing it publicly is even better. A little praise goes a long way to ease a tense, difficult environment without a lot of other rewards available.

In Pizza Hut's story, getting into delivery in the 1970s – way behind Dominoes and others – delivery people were obviously mostly younger males. Pizza Hut committed to a "30 minutes or less or free" policy, which caused these young guys to act unsafely. That was costly in terms of reputation and insurance. They offered drivers \$25 savings bonds for a certain number of hours of incident-free driving, which helped, but the program plateaued. So they bumped it to \$50 for a little more.

They plateaued again, and rose again. Still didn't get the performance and now paying a lot to get the bump.

But then "Top Gun" came out.

One franchise owner started giving out "Top Driver" hats. Problems plummeted because everyone wanted that damned hat! If you can do something similar on the golf course, you may get some really significant results. One key: there has to be a defined, transparent metric and not just "I like him best." One of my favorite comments – a guy said years ago, people don't do extraordinary things for money, but it sure improves their hearing.

Even small rewards, when valued, can generate big results.



Pat Jones, Editorial Director of Golf Industry Magazine gave a "State of the Golf Industry" presentation to the Palm Beach GCSA at their May 2011 meeting. Photo by Steve Wright.

3. Learn about your boss.

Or at least learn more about your boss. Here's the context: try to learn about the challenges and pressures he/she faces. What tradeoffs are they making on a regular basis? That may help you understand why the restaurant got new drapes and you didn't get the mower you wanted.

Stand in their shoes. Find out their hot buttons. For some it's honesty. For some it's underperformance or civility. It will help you avoid trouble. As a sidebar, try to learn more about the other operations within the club. It's too easy to keep your blinders on and assume that only the golf course matters. The other things do matter to a certain percentage of club patrons. It puts things in perspective.

Finally, also understand what metrics are being used to evaluate your boss. What factors determine his or her success and how did you help them achieve them?

4. Know your key success factors.

Key Success Factors are those underpinning concepts that determine whether your organization is going to be successful. Here's a non-golf example: in laptop computing, you can choose several ways to get into the market. Low price-low cost structure vs. Cadillac – higher cost but quality to live up to. You can be successful with either model, but that determines how you're going to drive your business. You can be like Dell or you can do everything high-brow and beat everyone on quality.

Superintendents need to look at the KSFs for the entire facility. Maintaining members? Attracting new members? Is the golf course really the key? Is it conditions, difficulty, reputation? You have to know. ID them and map them onto your segment of the business. If your KSF is attracting new members, how does your role play into that?

5. Plan!

Build something that lays out what your objectives are over time and build it around those KSFs. This is not a chemical app schedule or a labor schedule; it's a plan that ties removing trees to customer satisfaction, for example. It needs to be flexible – things change and you should have a contingency. Too many plans are lovely notebooks gathering dust on a shelf and yet people are surprised when it doesn't work.

Overall, start looking outside of your world. Find lessons from other disciplines and markets. It's too easy to narrowly focus on areas you're comfortable with. You know how to grow great grass, but broaden your perspective outside the technical world and course maintenance and think broadly about the rest of your operation. Business history is fraught with examples of ideas that worked in one area but failed overall. The tree was there, but the forest failed.

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