

Managing consultants

SUPERINTENDENTS CAN'T SURVIVE WITHOUT CONSULTANTS, BUT SOMETIMES THE CHALLENGE IS TO SURVIVE WITH THEM

by
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Q What is changing in the area of golf course consulting?

In one respect little has changed. Golf has always involved consultants. We have consultants that specialize in water salinity and testing. We use engineers to resolve drainage issues. We hire architects to improve the design of a course and its play. By definition the golf course superintendent deals with a broad range of issues, and no one can be an expert in every particular area, so we need to call in those who bring the necessary expertise. Our job is to protect the club's assets and to make sure that what we do is correct in the long term. The smart superintendent knows what he doesn't know, but gets the consulting help he needs to keep the course in great condition.

At the same time, golf has become more of a business and that creates opportunities for consultants. Some are very helpful and others are motivated as much by self-interest as service. Superintendents need to understand the role consultants can play, how to work with them, how to manage them, and to be aware of the potential down side.

Q What do you mean by the potential down side?

A number of superintendents have lost their jobs after their clubs hired consultants. The superintendents that seem most prone to this scenario work for private golf courses, are more than 40 years old and have higher salaries. Of course, when a consultant is hired he or she has been positioned to the superintendent as a resource to help them and improve the course. Later, the superintendent was let go.

Q Are there warning signs that the superintendent's job might be at risk?

In all of the cases the superintendents fired had no idea that a consultant was being hired. A number of these superintendents were called

to a meeting and found a consultant sitting there. Some have come to work in the morning only to find a consultant sitting in the office waiting for them.

Q Sounds like some golf courses are hiring consultants to get rid of their superintendents.

There are a range of possible reasons to explain what's going on. The firings I've heard about have been mostly on private courses, so politics is a possible factor. Some clubs want to make a change at the superintendent position but are not willing to do it themselves, so they hire a consultant to do it for them. The consultant's role might even be to come up with the justification to fire the superintendent.

But there are other possible motives. Budgets are tighter and if a club is told they could replace their superintendent for a big name person – at the same cost or less cost than the superintendent's salary – there's a temptation to do it. The scenario I am describing does not involve replacing the superintendent on a full-time basis, it involves a part-time, ongoing consulting relationship.

Some of the superintendents who have been fired were told that their clubs wanted to take the course to the next level. That is a legitimate objective, but I question if these club owners and managers even understand what the next level is? I also question why so many apparently did not bother to talk to their own on-site consultant first – their superintendent – about the desired changes before turning to an outside resource?

Q Should the superintendent be told if his club is considering hiring a consultant?

Absolutely, for two reasons. First, it's good business. If the desire is to improve the course, or to get ready for a major tournament, then the superintendent and the consultant will need to work together as a team. The consultant may bring special expertise, but the

superintendent knows the course better than anyone. So, why would any course not want their superintendent fully involved in this process, even to the point of helping to select the best consultant for the job?

Second, hiring a consultant without talking to the superintendent is unethical. It's not good business or the professional way to conduct a business.

Q That assumes the superintendent is not the problem.

If a course has a problem with their superintendent then they need to confront him or her and work out a solution, even if that means making a change. But being up front about this is the ethical approach.

Q Can a course really get by without a full-time superintendent?

A consultant can make the pitch that he offers greater expertise and experience for less money. The consultant determines the program, then assigns day-to-day operations to an assistant superintendent or to some other person who will be on the course every day. Unfortunately, I have heard that such programs have failed on a number of courses.

A golf course is always best served by having an experienced superintendent on site every day. Course conditions can change rapidly and someone with the necessary experience needs to be on site to make the right decisions regarding what to do and how to allocate people and other resources. No one can understand the weather patterns, equipment, staff, the club and members like the superintendent. None of this is cookie cutter stuff. It takes time and experience to know your soil types, irrigation water and the microclimate on a green that's in the shade on the hill, or on another green that has heavy clay soil. There are so many things that make every course different. Certainly the same principles apply to every course, but no two golf courses are exactly alike. One course I

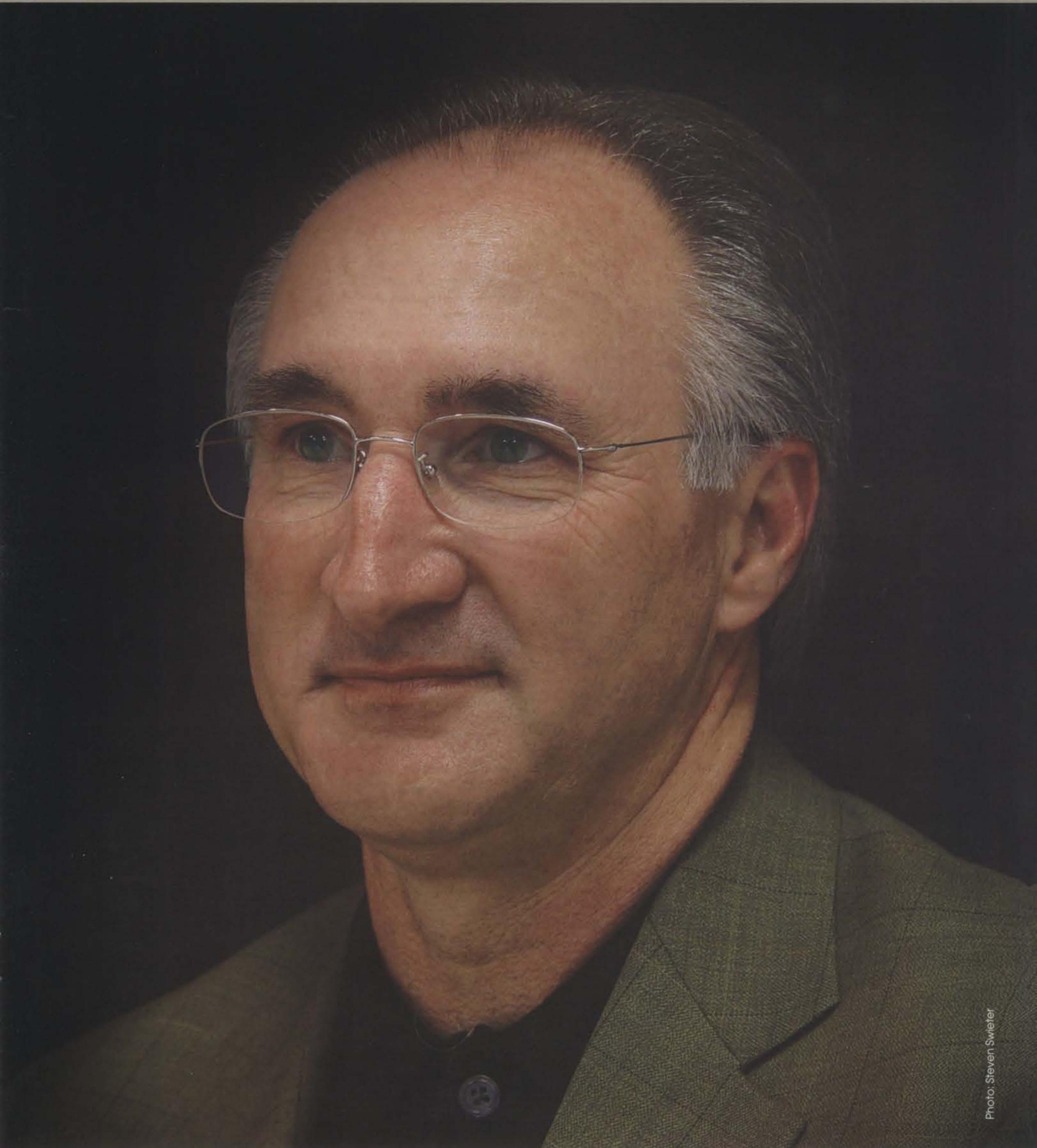


Photo: Steven Switeler

once managed had three different construction types and periods of greens on 18 holes. A consultant, no matter what his expertise, is not going to learn the intricacies of that when working part time.

When it comes to protecting the course the superintendent is the club's brains, so I question the management of any club that does not have their brains on site everyday. If the course has a good superintendent, then hiring a consultant part-time can be a mistake. If what a club wants is a high-profile superintendent, then hire one, but hire him or her as your full-time superintendent.

Q Your advice if a club hires a consultant without consulting the superintendent?

The first thing is to be professional and don't lose your head. Find out as much about the particular consultant and the hiring conditions as you can. Learn why the consultant has been hired and what management expects him to accomplish. Find out what the consultant's background is and his special expertise. If I learned some negative factual information about the consultant, I'd provide that information to my club. There are plenty of superintendents you can call to get background information about a consultant.

The second thing I'd do is gather ammunition regarding what you have been doing on the course and why. The consultant is going to be asking for this information anyway. You are going to be asked what you have done to the course and why. If it comes down to your opinion vs. the outside expert's opinion, you lose. After all, the club hired him to solve a problem or improve conditions. So you will need to back up what you've been doing on the course and the reasons for it. Hopefully you can cite outside sources that you've consulted for advice and expertise. The opinions and recommendations of third-party sources, including university experts, USGA and even other superintendents, command respect. Your objective is to be able to talk about your program from a technical perspective and not come across as being defensive.

Related to this, if a consultant writes a report that says something the superintendent is doing is wrong, the superintendent should have access to that report and be able to argue his or her side.

The third thing I would do is record everything that happens. For example, document if the consultant makes recommendations that you know are not the best for the course or that part of the country. The problem then is that you have been put in a no-win situation. If you disagree with that consultant you might

risk being terminated for refusing to carry out his directions. And if you do what you believe to be wrong, then you are compromising your principles. So, record everything that is said and done. That way if the greens experience problems the following year, you will have a record of what was done and why.

Q That assumes you want to still work for the course.

The issue behind all this is deciding whether you want to continue working for an employer who has treated you unprofessionally and with little respect. At the time you find out that a consultant has been hired you can't predict the outcome in terms of your final standing with ownership – whether they will keep you or not. But assuming you survive, the question is whether your relationship with the club will ever be the same again. If the answer is 'no,' then what are you going to do about it?

If I had a bad feeling about a consultant being brought in over my head, I would update my resume and start contacting close associates to see what the job market looks like – just in case.

Q What if the superintendent is fired?

Negotiate the best severance package that you can. Being fired is sometimes similar to being hired in terms of being able to negotiate. When you're hired an employer may have made concessions to get you on board. When you are fired they might want you to go away quietly and be willing to make concessions on severance pay and benefits.

Depending upon the circumstances of your termination and your relationship with the golf course, it might be wise to contact an attorney to help you decide your best option. I would consider talking to an attorney before signing any release papers or termination agreements.

Q Is there a way to avoid a problem altogether?

Being proactive about your course is the best action you can take. It's ironic, but the way to avoid being surprised by the hiring of an outside consultant is to use your own consultants. Being proactive does not always require spending money. It can be as simple as seeing something coming up that you've not done, and getting help from another superintendent who has done it. We did exactly that in 2002 when we renovated a course. I called Bill Womak, superintendent at the Dunwoody Country Club, to come in and offer his advice. Since then a neighboring su-

perintendent visited me about a pending renovation at his course. I ran through some of the issues he will face, like the need to have a contingency fund in the budget. In our renovation we had to add a bridge that was not in the plan, and we hit a spring that cost a lot of money to fix. My advice will help him budget better because of the experiences I have had.

I would never discount the value of advice from other superintendents in your immediate area. There is so much expertise available and superintendents always help other superintendents. One young superintendent told me recently that he could tap 50 years of experience just by calling me and one other superintendent that he worked for and trusts.

Q How can a young superintendent find and tap into outside expertise?

Connect with those in the industry. When I became a superintendent I made sure all the well-respected superintendents in my area knew who I was. I went out of my way to ask for their advice and they are always willing to help me. Now as I get older, I will call younger guys who worked for me and now are on their own.

The problem is that we're all so busy nowadays that there is less and less of that interaction going on. Superintendents need to visit other courses and see what they're doing – how they use fans on their greens, etc. By getting to know other superintendents, when you have a problem you can call them and they will come to offer their best advice.

A structured way to do this is to join an association and go to your chapter meetings. In our GCSAA chapter we have created an email list. This is an excellent way to get advice fast, for example, what companies do good cart path work in your area?

Most superintendents stay in touch with their university instructors, but you also need to make contact with local university people to get local information. We call university people on a monthly basis about issues or to ask questions. You can also work with them to test new things.

Chemical companies are often helpful, too. We've gotten help from the local and national technical people. We've also done some experimental-use-permit work with some companies.

Finally, it's wise to network beyond your area. I became active in GCSAA and that allowed me to interact with people who have similar business situations from other parts of the nation. There are several superintendents at 36-hole facilities around

the country that I enjoy talking to about issues pertinent to larger operations. I met many of these through GCSAA committees and the GCSAA Golf Championship. Despite any differences in geography, all of these superintendents and I deal with similar issues and we benefit from each other's advice.

Q Do you use consultants on a regular basis?

I have made it a habit to use my USGA Greens Section agronomist every year. I write up a list of questions about grasses and problems, things I'm interested in and ongoing issues, then invite him in to look over my course and talk. USGA offers a consulting service by the half-day or day and the cost is very reasonable. I budget for it every year. The value to me is that Pat O'Brien, my USGA agronomist, travels the entire southeast region and sees a lot of courses. He lets me know what other clubs are doing.

Working with USGA also is a proactive way to document that what you want to do is the correct thing. What I like about USGA is that there are no financial incentives behind their recommendations. They also offer a long-term perspective. It's one thing for a course to grow a grass to spruce up the course for a tournament, but that's different than having grown that grass for several years.

Much of the progress we've made on my courses were prefaced in a USGA report. USGA helps me determine my improvement program, gives me their approval on smart moves, and sometimes has changed my mind on things I was thinking of doing. I respect their opinion.

Q What positives can a consultant bring?

People accept the advice of experts. When I decided we needed to rebuild greens on the Highland course I knew outside backup would be helpful. I arranged for a USGA agronomist to test the greens. I brought in an architect to get his opinion. They agreed that the greens needed to be fixed. So, when I stood before our members I had the added credibility needed to make my case. Some superintendents may be afraid to bring in outside experts because it might appear to diminish their importance. That's not so. We all use people for advice. When doing something as important as remodeling, it's only wise to seek and get the special expertise needed.

An outside opinion also can be useful regarding controversial issues, such as taking down trees. Superintendents get in trouble

when they mess with course design or trees, but not when they change the fertilizer program. Golfers react most to things they touch and see.

Q What value can a business consultant bring?

On the business side, consultants can help a course in a number of ways. The superintendent acts as a purchasing agent, and consultant advice can help him decide whether to buy equipment or lease it. An expert can help you decide what's best to do and help you sell it to the club. They can also help you think outside the box. A number of courses are running into issues with benefits. We work to retain people by making the Atlanta Athletic Club a great place to work, but as a result we experience more health insurance claims. So, employee retention can save a golf course money, but cost it money in benefits. A consultant can help us work through this issue.

The only sure thing in golf is that we'll do things differently every year. Consultants can bring you new ideas and solutions to improve profits, improve quality and market better.

Q What's your advice to superintendents regarding job security?

Be proactive, communicate and take great care of your course. The best possible job security comes from taking great care of your course and from knowing what's going on.

Some superintendents have contracts with their courses to protect them in the long term. I have one and all of our managers at the Atlanta Athletic Club are under contract. I worked for a long time without one. The problem with working on an informal agreement is that it does not protect you five or 10 years down the road when the owner or manager may have died or left the course. A contract puts issues like severance and arbitration down in writing. It would be a good idea to include in your contract that you must be informed before any outside consultant is hired.

There are possible downsides to employment contracts. They turn people off. They also work both ways – they put restrictions on your ability to leave, for example. And ultimately, if the club doesn't want you there anymore, then you don't want to be there either, despite what the contract says. What the contract prevents is giving you little or no notice that you no longer have a job.

Q What is your advice to golf course management regarding consultants?

Simply this: Do the research and background checks to determine what the consultant's motives are and their recent track record. If a consultant stands to make thousands of dollars per year from the advice offered, then that should serve as a warning flag. I have heard of consultants that profit directly from the fertilizer or other products they recommend to get the job done. The club may not know that, especially if they are looking for a silver bullet solution.

It's also important to check out the consultant's track record – not what they have done in their careers, but what they've done as consultants, especially most recently. As the saying goes, 'Nothing is impossible for someone who does not have to do it.' It's easy for a consultant to fly in and say this and this needs to be done. The question is can they do it? The question also is, why can't the club's own superintendent do it? Does he have the resources? Does he have the expertise? If not, can he get it through his own network of consultants?

I'd also check the record of any outside consultant in your area of the country and on your type of grass. Being an expert in the southwest doesn't make you one in the northeast or midwest.

Q Advice for owners and managers about their relationships with their superintendents?

Camaraderie, professionalism and ethics have long been the norm in golf and these ideals have helped make the game what it is. The rise of golf for profit has put pressure on those ideals. Today, it's often about money and we know what the money does to people. Despite this, the ethical aspect of golf remains as important as ever. The relationship between the superintendent and his course owner or manager has to be based on trust. The superintendent is entrusted with the course's most valuable asset and can only do the job correctly when his or her judgment and knowledge is trusted by those he works for. Going around the superintendent crosses a line and damages or destroys the trust relationship. It would be no different than if the owner hired a management consultant without talking to his or her general manager first, or a retail consultant without talking to the golf professional first. GCN

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