

by DAVID WOLFF

The career of even a distinguished superintendent like Gary Grigg, CGCS, can be abruptly changed in a matter of minutes. At age 50, Grigg had been a successful golf course superintendent for more than 23 years and was on the board of directors of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA).

Five years into the job, Grigg had transformed a barren piece of land into a *Golf Digest* Top 100 course. But when the owner turned the facility over to a management company, Grigg was informed that his pay exceeded the company's acceptable salary scale. His option was to take a 50 percent pay cut or resign.

Despite his many contributions, Grigg says he was given no indication from management that a management company was being considered, or the changes that would mean. The lesson, he says, is that hard work and performance are not enough to ensure job security in the golf course business.

"I gave that course five years of blood, sweat and tears and made it a first class

facility," he says. "I supervised construction, grew in the course and developed a maintenance program. But the job of a management company is to save money and it's easier to just promote the assistant."

Fortunately, Grigg says his story had a silver lining. Using the many industry contacts he had built up over the years, he found a better superintendent position and spent another 10 years in the profession. Along the way he earned the Master Greenskeeper distinction, became president of the GCSAA, and eventually started his own business.

"Getting fired isn't always bad news," Grigg says, "but it is all too common for superintendents in today's market."

In a December 2003 *Golf Course News* online survey, 37 percent of superintendents reported they have been terminated or left a position because of technical performance issues, budgetary changes or personality/political reasons (see page 11). Of all causes, personality/political was cited as the most common reason, by 23 percent of the respondents.

How are you doing and how do you know?

YOUR CAREER AND JOB SATISFACTION DEPEND
ON MORE THAN GREAT COURSE MAINTENANCE

Asked if a friend who was a superintendent has ever been terminated or left a position for personality/political reasons, 96 percent of those surveyed responded yes.

The arbitrary termination of a successful superintendent can be for a number of reasons:

- "He's a great person; he just can't communicate."
- "He doesn't do well in meetings."
- "He got buried in club politics."
- "He's competent but not well known by the members."

The GCSAA has attempted to quantify turnover among superintendents. Statistics the association compiled from January to June 2003 list the following reasons for superintendent job openings:

- 50 percent were voluntary resignations
- 31 percent were new openings
- 13 percent were terminations
- 6 percent were promotions

Reasons for termination included:

- 27 percent for technical performance
- 13 percent for poor communication
- 20 percent for lack of professionalism
- 40 percent for non-specified reasons

Grigg, now a vice president and agronomist with Grigg Brothers Corp., an Idaho-based fertilizer company, offers his insight into these statistics.

"I have to take issue that 50 percent of the resignations were voluntary," he says. "Like me, a good number of superintendents were offered that choice as opposed to being fired. As for the 40 percent figure for non-specified reasons, I believe most were let go for economic reasons, specifically salary."

With regard to being terminated for "professionalism," Griggs believes something as simple as appearance is a major factor.

"I know of one superintendent whose golf course was immaculate, but he was short and overweight," he says. "He was terminated because of his lack of a 'professional' image."

To counter image issues, Grigg advises superintendents to always have a fresh change of clothes in their office. "Don't go to meetings in your work clothes and dirty boots," he says. "Clean up your act."

Experienced superintendents cite seven pitfalls which can hinder a career or even result in loss of your job. It's important to be aware of these problem areas, and for superintendents to take action to improve their standing with management, golfers, workers, neighbors and your local community. The seven common pitfalls are:

Pitfall No. 1 — What we have is a failure to communicate

The GCSAA data shows that most superintendents don't lose their jobs because of poor course conditions. Most are fired or forced to resign because they can't or don't communicate with the owner, general manager, greens committee chairman or golfers.

Unfortunately, most agronomic educational programs do not adequately prepare superintendents for this aspect of their careers. The recent *Golf Course News* survey shows that 46 percent of the respondents considered their formal training inadequate in terms of people skills. Because they are not trained to deal effectively with people, these skills must be mastered on the job if superintendents are to succeed.

Bruce Williams, CGCS, superintendent of Los Angeles Country Club, Los Angeles, Calif., and a past president of the GCSAA, says a root problem is personality. The typical superintendent is introverted, he notes, while the typical golf pro is extroverted.

"Superintendents need to learn to be people persons," he explains. "They should take every opportunity to get in front of people. Give speeches, address boards and committees, coach a youth team. Golf courses are begging for superintendents with communication skills."

Tommy Witt, CGCS, and also a GCSAA past president, is superintendent of Northmoor Country Club, Highland Park, Ill. He says superintendents need to be the source of information about what's going on at the golf course.

"Superintendents need to attend board and committee meetings because you don't want someone else answering questions for you," Witt says.

Pitfall No. 2 — Perception is not always reality

Many superintendents don't understand the difference between perception and reality. They may be putting in 60-hour weeks, but nobody knows it. It's important to be seen in the right places at the right times, such as in the locker room, in the pro shop or on the first tee. Superintendents should write articles for their clubs' newsletters, make use of their clubs' Web sites and e-mail, and post photos on the progress of course projects. They must develop strategies to counteract a negative perception.

"In an appropriate way, remind management and golfers of what you do and how well you do it," Witt says. "It's amazing to me that everyone knows the golf pro, but many times, they do not know the

superintendent's name. How can we be valuable if no one knows who we are?"

There are other ways for superintendents to step out of their comfort levels and increase their visibility. If they are golfers, they should make an effort to play with all segments of the membership. If a superintendent negotiates a good deal on a greens mower, let the club know you've spent their money wisely. Make your employers aware of your financial management skills.

"It is imperative that your employer understands in a subtle but effective way that your skills and experience are key components to managing their most important asset — the golf course," Witt says. "They have to realize that they just can't hire anyone off the street to do your job."

Grigg adds, "your employer needs to understand the value an experienced superintendent brings to the operation in areas such as staff training, protection from potential lawsuits and safety compliance issues."

Pitfall No. 3 — The customer is always right

Failure to build strong relationships can be a job killer.

"Rarely do superintendents lose their jobs for bad greens," Williams says. "More often, it's because they're not skilled in customer service disciplines. You have to find out what governing bodies or golfers want. If you close the course for minor situations, you have to be visible and be prepared to defend your decision. For example, make sure everyone knows your aeration schedule. Publicize it in the club newsletter, post it in the locker room."

Pitfall No. 4 — I never saw it coming

"You have to know when to hold, and know when to fold," Williams says. A superintendent may think he's doing a good job, but he has to be able to read the attitudes of the governing boards, whether it's a public or private course. A bad performance review, a change in board personnel or grumblings golfers should cause him to look for possible issues that are developing.

"Many superintendents have told me they saw the signs but didn't do anything about it," Williams says. "It's not hard to see the red flags when you hear griping and complaining. If you find out something is not working, be proactive. The negativity is tough to take, but you have to effect change."

While club politics are unavoidable, superintendents must be careful not to be drawn into the web of private agendas. For

How to know how you're doing:

With golfers and club members:

1. Survey visiting, active and previously active golfers about course conditions.
2. Learn who the opinion leaders are and their agendas for the course.
3. Be visible at major golf and non-golf events.
4. Suggest creation of a master plan for your course.
5. Write a column for your course's newsletter and invite feedback.

With owners, management and the pro:

1. Meet for lunch just to talk.
2. Attend board meetings and respond to any issues.
3. Communicate your continuing education achievements.
4. Get an annual personnel review that includes goals for the coming year.

With employees:

1. Ask your crews what golfers are saying about the course and what they think.

With residents and the community:

1. Attend meetings and invite questions.
2. Visit residents and neighbors periodically.
3. Ask local police to call you about any emergencies on or near your course.
4. Be sensitive about the environmental impact of planned actions.
5. Join professional golf organizations to stay on top of legislative and legal issues.

example, if a club is disorganized and the green chairman has a pet project, not all board members will agree with his direction. But if the chairman is dominant and does all the talking, he may position the superintendent on one side on the issue, sometimes even without the superintendent being aware of the situation at all.

"Superintendents can often find themselves in no-win situations," Witt says. "But in the end, honesty is always the best policy. My advice is to give the pertinent information factually and professionally, and never give an ultimatum. Usually this strategy leads to wise decisions."

Pitfall No. 5 — I'm OK, you're OK

Complacency can result in superintendents losing their jobs. When a club makes a change in the general manager or director of golf operations positions, superintendents need to be sensitive to what this can mean to their job standing.

"What superintendents need to recognize quickly is that this is the new person's kingdom, and he or she is king. They are the boss and things will run their way. Be prepared to embrace change," Witt advises.

On average general managers change jobs every three years and they often bring in their own managers, associates they have worked with from previous operations, and people they trust and with whom they have personal relationships.

"A friend of mine was superintendent at a high-end club in Atlanta for 29 years and had an impeccable reputation," Witt says. "The club hired a new general manager, and the superintendent was gone — replaced by a friend of the new manager. The lesson is to embrace change in the management structure. You have to be able to adapt."

At private clubs, turnover among staff and boards of directors can be a huge factor in the political scene. Compounding the issue is that turnover reduces opportunities for superintendents to build trust and confidence with management. In response, superintendents need to ask themselves what has to be done to meet this person's

expectations this year?

Pitfall No. 6 — Check your ego at the door

There is a growing trend in the industry for golf professionals to name themselves directors of operations. Trying to emulate that, some superintendents have taken on the title of "director of golf course maintenance," and then name an assistant as the superintendent.

While this strategy to increase professional stature may work at a multiple course operation, it may backfire at an 18-hole course if the general manager eventually comes to the conclusion that he has two superintendents, eliminating the \$90,000 per year director of golf course maintenance, and retaining the superintendent who is making \$50,000.

"Some general managers and owners are intimidated by competent, experienced superintendents," Witt says. "The superintendent may be better educated and confident, and this can strike fear in some people. Remember that and tone it down."

Pitfall No. 7 — You don't own the course

Beware of an overbearing sense of ownership; it's not your course. In some cases, because the superintendent built and grew in the course, or has a long tenure, he views himself as the key person and considers the course to be his own. This can be a huge mistake.

"Anyone who thinks this way won't be around long," Grigg says. "The superintendent has been entrusted with the maintenance of the golf course, but it's not his course. It's good to have pride in your course, but remember, you're not indispensable."

Plan your future

In addition to his responsibilities at Los Angeles Country Club, Williams advises superintendents on career planning.

"The average tenure of a superintendent on a course is now about 6 1/2 years, according to GCSAA," he says. "Know that you're likely to change jobs several times in your career, and approach your present job like you're preparing for the next one. The more well-rounded and broad-based your experience, the better off you'll be."

"At the same time, work to develop a niche. Do you have construction experience? Have you hosted an important tournament? Look at your job as a career and take the steps to build your portfolio."

The reality is that there is an oversupply of superintendents. A bumper crop of young people with degrees and little experience are flooding the market, and they work for less

money. Those on the bubble are the established superintendents in the 45- to 50-year age range and having correspondingly higher salaries than younger superintendents.

"Concentrate on doing a good job and the word will spread about your reputation," Witt advises.

About 15 to 20 percent of superintendents change jobs every year. In considering your next job, try to find a position working for good owners and managers. Does the employer put a premium on character and substance? Are the expectations realistic? What is the organization's track record for how it treats people? What is the turnover ratio?

Interview potential employers as carefully as they interview you. That way, you won't accept a bad job and put yourself in a position to lose.

Professional training

With so many demands being made on superintendents, a key to career success is to identify your shortcomings and work on training and skills development to overcome them. For example, a superintendent might never learn to enjoy giving presentations, but he or she can learn to become an effective presenter and to be more comfortable giving them.

A number of career-building resources are available for superintendents. GCSAA offers a free booklet on communication — the "cornerstone of professional relationships" — and a free booklet on career development. GCSAA also offers kits on weathering economic downturns, effective employer/superintendent relations and employment resources.

For career development, the association offers educational seminars, workshops, and forums covering technical information and "softer" people and management skills. Workshop topics include: "How to Manage Your Relationship with Your Employer," "Recruitment and Retention Tips," "Public Speaking Strategies," and "Crisis Communication Strategies."

Williams urges superintendents to take advantage of seminars and workshops offered in their areas. "Attend local chapter meetings and browse the business sections of bookstores for self-help, motivational and management books," he advises. "Take charge of your career." GCN

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