

# Three's company

TEAMWORK, UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT ARE NEEDED AMONG SUPERINTENDENTS, GENERAL MANAGERS AND GOLF PROFESSIONALS FOR MANAGEMENT TO WORK BEST

by  
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**Q** How many superintendents are at a facility with a general manager and a golf professional?

Typically, if there's a general manager, it's a private club or a resort course or something like that. Maybe half the clubs in the country – or maybe 5,000 or 6,000 clubs – are set up in that situation.

You get two different systems: the triumvirate management system and the g.m./chief operating officer concept. Most municipalities and the ma-and-pa courses don't fit that type of system, so you have to rule most of those out.

Then there are some courses that have the director-of-golf concept, which is usually the golf professional as his supervisor. It's not always like that, but he has supervision over the golf course as a part of his duty in some cases. In California, the g.m. system is the majority. Coming from Chicago, it's the minority there – more of them would be in the triumvirate management system.

**Q** In that system, who answers to whom?

In a true g.m. concept – and that's a problem: Some of these are quasi-g.m. concepts – there's no question in the organizational chart that the g.m. runs the business as the c.o.o. or chief executive officer, and the superintendent and golf professional typically report to him. In a quasi-g.m. concept, sometimes a person has a g.m. title by name but not necessarily by responsibility, and then the superintendent or professional might report to the board or to committees.

**Q** Is the industry experiencing more of the quasi-setup?

It appears more organizations are moving toward a true g.m. concept rather than some form of it.

**Q** To make the business structure more clear?

Usually, you have a president of a company or a c.o.o. or whatever the title might be, and we all report to somebody. So no matter what structure you work in, a golf course superin-

tenant ultimately reports to a green committee, a board of directors or a g.m., and in some cases, a director of golf.

**Q** Because there's a superintendent, g.m. and pro at many facilities, is there a power struggle among them? And is there a perception that the three don't get along?

The key word is 'can.' There can be. It's just like you can have a happy marriage, and you can have an unhappy marriage. Many times, the choice is yours, and if there are struggles, they typically exist because there's a lack of mutual respect among one another.

I've taught seminars for years for the PGA of America, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and the Club Managers Association of America, and one of the things I like to key in on is the importance of mutual respect for a team to work together. I need to appreciate the roles the golf professional and g.m. play, as well as understand their challenges and what's going to make them successful. I need to put myself in the position that I can try to contribute to things that are going to make them successful, and, in turn, they're going to operate the same way with me. For example, when it rains in Southern California and I haven't had rain in five months, I'm a pretty happy guy. But how happy is the golf professional? He has to cancel his lessons that day. Different things make us happy, but we have to appreciate what's good for the other person.

**Q** Because everything is linked together?

Everything is linked together, and where some people lose sight – and you hope they never do – is success of the operation, not the individual. Golf is a business. It's a sport, but it's a business. And unless you're able to run the numbers through a golf facility – keeping carts running the number of days you need to, serving what you have forecasted in terms of meals and beverages – to generate the revenue you need, it takes everybody working together to make that happen.

**Q** So the big picture and working as a team are important?

That's right. But I don't want to paint this picture because someone will say, "That's not my golf course." So I have to say that with a caveat. In some cases, superintendents have been satisfied staying in the distinct area of the golf course and golf course maintenance.

The superintendent that will fair well in the future will have a much improved understanding of how the total business runs. When I say that – knowing what membership numbers are and how many years of a waiting list there is, knowing what the cash flow of the operation is, knowing the challenges they have in scheduling events and understanding all the different aspects at many places – it's the superintendent who only takes care of the golf course and is unaware of some of those other areas who will fall behind. So when a business, especially a golf course, is being challenged financially, a typical thing is to reduce expenses and increase revenues. We can be a part of that, and we can assist in that area if we have a pretty good understanding of it.

**Q** Are you saying the perception of the three not getting along depends on the course?

When I assisted the PGA with a golf course operations manual, I tried to say that it goes back to mutual respect. We have different roles, and we have to understand that we serve at different capacities, but the end product is a result of different ways that we are approaching and attacking things.

What makes me happy? Having only 20 players a day or being closed on a Monday – those things are good for superintendents because they're good for turf. But what good is that if you can't pay the bills at the end of the month? I used to caution some of the young apprentices that would work for me, and they would say, "We could get something done if it wasn't for all of the damn players out here," and I said, "Kiss the ground those players walk on because if it wasn't for all of those players, we wouldn't get a paycheck every two weeks." You have to understand that we're not just an expense area in a business, we are a revenue generator by producing good,

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quality conditions and how that fits in the overall picture of the club budget versus the golf course maintenance budget.

Back to the point. It's almost like a marriage. When you find two people that have the most blissful, wonderful marriage, it doesn't get any better than that. The same thing is true with the professional/manager/superintendent relationship. But when you find one that's bad, there's no fixing it.

can I do to make your job easier?" it might turn the tables around.

**Q What would be the ideal relationship between the three?**

The ideal relationship is a clearly designated chain of command. So, do I report to three different people, do I report to one person? Does everything flow through the g.m. and back to my peer? For example, if I need to

and talk to people. Those are important.

One of the things we do at our club is bowl together once a week – the golf pro, the g.m. and myself. That says a lot to build personal relationships that are outside of the business. I've got a new g.m. who came here about eight months ago. But prior to that, our other one was here for 35 years, and we tried to play the golf course together once a week.

I'll add the caveat I give when teaching seminars: If you go out to play golf with your superintendent, g.m. or director of golf, and for 18 holes, you show them everything that's wrong, they're going to be busy next time you want to play. If you go out and enjoy yourself, perhaps when you get done, later that day or the next day, say, "Hey Fred, when we were out there playing there's a couple of things that I noticed. Help me understand these things." Part of it isn't what we say, but how we say it.

**"People should get off the idea of who is more important and who's worth more. For an operation to succeed, everyone must work together."**

**Q And that stems from one or two of the three not understanding the big picture and not having respect for the others?**

Well, usually it's a lack of respect – that's a part of it. Other things that breed contempt are territorialism – when people say things like, "It's not my job," "It's only me," "That's your problem not my problem."

**Q What advice would you give to superintendents about understanding the big picture and respecting the g.m. and pro?**

Before becoming superintendents, people should spend a couple weeks in other people's shoes. They should see if they can work in the food-and-beverage center and in the pro shop to understand what the people talk about when they have complaints about the golf course. They should understand what it's like before a shotgun start from the golf professional's eyes.

I was fortunate. I started as a caddy, worked for a golf professional for three or four years, and worked with soft goods merchandising and dealt with customers. Then I worked for a superintendent who was a g.m., who said, "You need to get inside and see the food-and-beverage side of things." So I worked on the golf course for four or five hours, then I went in and was a waiter during lunch, and I went back out on the golf course when I was done.

So anybody who gets a broad scope of things, it's going to be extremely beneficial to them in their career. That's good when you're 21, but what do you do when you're 25 or 30 while you're a superintendent and you get into relationships? Walk a mile in another man's shoes. Try and figure out his challenges. If there's no communication, you're never going to find out. But, if you ask questions like, "What can I do to assist you?" and "What

have something done through the pro, do I work with him, or does it flow back to the g.m. and the g.m. gives the directive? I'm not saying one system is going to work better than another, but understand the system.

Certainly, a second feature is communication. The worse case scenarios are the water-cooler meetings in which I see the pro or manager everyday for about five minutes and have a cup of coffee together. The organizations that I've been involved with and serve better have normal meetings and agendas. For example, when a tournament is coming up, a prospectus should let everybody know what role they play, so everybody knows what each person is doing.

**Q Do superintendents not get the credit they deserve many times because the pro and g.m. have more visibility to the public?**

Yes, but sometimes it's their own fault. For years, the GCSAA has had an image campaign, and it talks about public relations. There's a feeling that the association is going to solve that for the member. The reality is the association can only put the tools in superintendents' hands, and then they have to have their own grassroots public relations campaign. So whether it's getting your name on the scorecard at a new golf facility, addressing the ladies about the flowers on the golf course or attending the men's scratch league to discuss green speed, you've got to develop your own public relations program. And there's nothing wrong with spending time around the first tee after a shotgun start. You have to make your own opportunity and capitalize on it.

There's a lot of guys that do it well, but as a whole, more people need to do that. Some do it by playing golf with members, some do it by dining or having lunch at the snack bar or grill. You have to be able to field questions

**Q Do one of these three tend to stay longer at a course? And how does that relate to their relationship if somebody new arrives?**

The average tenure at a club for a manager is about three years; for a superintendent, it's about seven years; and for a golf professional, it's about five years. Why is it that way? Well, in some cases, the superintendent can be the one with the most experience at a club, and that has its good and bad sides. He's an established person there – that can be a good thing, but it can be a threat to some people. I can't imagine it being a threat, but a small thinker could think it's a threat. Somebody that has 150 acres to manage and knows it like the back of his hand is nothing but a benefit.

**Q You mentioned the g.m. What's his name?**

Our new g.m. is Kirk Reese, and the pro's name is Jim Schaeffer.

**Q What's your relationship with them?**

I'm in one of those marriages that's blissful – it doesn't get any better than this. That's the kind of guys I'm working with. It hasn't always been that way in my career, but where I'm at right now, it's extremely blissful. They are great guys to work with – they're professional. We work hard, produce an excellent product and do it with teamwork. As I mentioned earlier, I bowl with these fellas. We've gone on golf junkets together, play golf together and eat lunch together. When you're spending more time with the people you work with than you probably are with your family, which is not uncommon in this business, you have to work together and get along.

**Q What's the structure like?**

We are in a true g.m. concept. I report to the g.m., and the g.m. reports to the board of the directors. I don't report to a green committee. But where I came from, in Chicago, I reported to the green committee chairman and the board of the directors. The manager was a clubhouse manager, and he just oversaw the food and beverage.

**Q What at your old job wasn't as good as what you have now?**

Let's not speak about the downside of the old job, let's speak to the upside of this job that I've had for 7½ years. We don't miss a beat in the formality, planning and organization of what we do. Everything flows through the g.m., who goes over all of the details that need to be taken care of for every function. Not on a day-to-day basis because people run their own functions, but when it comes to the big events, we'll have a meeting with all of the department heads and sign off on everything. The formality of the organization is fantastic. I love working in that environment.

**Q Is it easier for a superintendent to do his job when there's a structure with a g.m. and pro, or is it easier when a superintendent is doing his own thing?**

Every course is different. I'll give you an example. I worked for Frank Dobie at The Sharon (Ohio) Golf Club. He's a nice guy and one of my mentors. He's a g.m. at a club that only serves lunch, not dinner. They do most of their golf six months out of the year. He's a g.m./superintendent, and that's the right fit for that club. They don't have a swimming pool or tennis courts. All they have is golf. They are getting two for one: One guy overseeing both jobs, and that's great.

When you end up with operations that have a small golf shop and a snack bar or grill rather than a full-service restaurant with 1,500 covers on a busy day, they might have a different fit. When you have something that has an independent food-and-beverage operation that's profitable, obviously you have to have greater structure.

**Q So basically, the larger the facility, the larger the operation and the more likely you are to have a three-tiered management?**

Yes, and I'm not an advocate of one or the other. First of all, when you get hired somewhere, you don't have a lot of choices to decide the governing system. But you have a choice to change, if necessary, to fit into that governance model. I come from a triumvirate management system, and I can say, "This

will never work, I don't like it, I don't know why I have to do this." But you shouldn't go there if you can't make that adjustment.

**Q So you have to be flexible and fit into different structures?**

Right. We each have our roles. Part of my role in the g.m. concept is to provide a strong department and a good product and try to make my boss look good.

**Q What about salary? From what I understand, in years past, the g.m. always made more money than the superintendent, but now the superintendent is coming up to parity with the g.m., if not, in some instances, making more.**

It can go a couple ways. If someone is a true g.m., that person should be compensated at a higher level than the superintendent. That's not my opinion, that's just how business operates. The person at the higher end of the organizational chart has more responsibility and more people reporting to him because they're overseeing not just the golf course, but food and beverage and everything else. So, it's logical that they are compensated accordingly. Many people wouldn't debate that. When you get into the triumvirate management system, sometimes there's disagreements about how people are compensated. Everyone thinks their turf or area is the most important part of the job. Some of it has to do with longevity of the job, but I know more than a few cases where superintendents make more than their counterparts at a golf facility.

For example, I know some superintendents that make more than the professionals they work with. I know superintendents that make more than the clubhouse managers that they work with. Is that the majority? No. It's not so much about making more, it's more about some level of parity and trying to be compensated for what the standard is and the norm in your area. What's the going rate for a golf pro in a city like Chicago? Well, if you want to hire one, you're going to see what they're paying at other clubs—same thing with a superintendent or g.m. The histories show that at least the majority of g.m.s are paid more than the superintendents, but the gap between the two of them isn't that big.

**Q Does it go back to respect of the g.m. knowing how much the superintendent makes, and the g.m. being able to understand that even though he makes more, the salaries might be fairly close?**

I'd hope my peers would be happy if they're working for a g.m. where he or she is fairly

compensated and not worry so much about being even with them, but working for an organization that does its homework to make sure people are compensated fairly. No matter which way we look at it, some people might squabble and say, "How come so and so is making more than I am?" Don't worry about other people, worry about your own situation. If someone else in the organization, whether it be a golf professional or g.m., is making more than you, you can look at it as either the cup being half empty or half full. I'm happy if the g.m. or pro is compensated fairly because that means that I'm working for people that are going to compensate me fairly. Don't worry about what they get, take care of yourself.

**Q Do you attend board meetings? Are superintendents a part of board meetings more, and if so, how are g.m.s reacting to that?**

I don't attend board meetings, but I attended every board meeting at my prior job. It's a different way of looking at things. The minutes of the green committee meetings, which I attend, are forwarded and are dealt with at the board level. So the g.m. speaks for the organization and my department at the board level. I'm comfortable with the former and the current g.m.s carrying our message properly. But I have seen more superintendents in the triumvirate management system attending board meetings than I did 20 years ago.

Many successful clubs share their financial information with the golf course superintendent and other department heads on a month-to-month basis to show the direction the business is going. You can't take golf course maintenance and do it independently without seeing how it fits into the bigger picture.

**Q Anything else that's important?**

People should get off the idea of who's more important and who's worth more. For an operation to succeed, everyone must work together. You can't have a food-and-beverage operation that doesn't get along and communicate well with the golf course maintenance operation. I can guarantee that if you're at a club and the pro, superintendent and g.m. don't get along, one or more of them will be gone. And why does it have to be that way? For you to work well with your fellow people, you have to make them want to be successful. So, if there's jealousy, animosity or contempt, it's probably not going to work. GCN

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