



Monroe Miller retired after 36 years as superintendent at Blackhawk CC in Madison, Wis. He is a recipient of the 2004 USGA Green Section Award, the 2009 GCSAA Col. John Morley DSA Award, and is the only superintendent in the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame. Reach him at groots@charter.net.

MOVING IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION

More superintendents are out of jobs without decent explanations.



“Have we reached a point in our society and businesses that years of productive service don't count for anything?”

It is the ebb and flow of our business. Superintendents take new positions and new hires fill the voids. We have retirements, career changes and promotions. Course management as a whole seems to be in a state of flux most of the time, more so now than when I started my career.

Sadly, we also have firings and dismissals to deal with where some are justified, some aren't, and some are neither. I would say some are “neither” because, more and more, people simply do not know why they lost their job. It drives me crazy when a colleague is let go with the admonition, “we're going in a different direction.”

I worked in a different

time. In those years superintendents often stayed at the same club or golf course for many years, and firings were pretty unusual.

Likewise, most of us were the only breadwinner. My wife didn't start working outside our home until our youngest child was going to grade school. She sent her off to school in the morning and met her when the bus brought her home that afternoon. Her work was part-time, a recognition of the high cost of daycare and the endless work that goes into keeping a household going. It also considered that I didn't exactly work a neat and clean eight-hour day. Oftentimes, it was daylight to dark.

I was the principal

income earner and getting fired just wasn't an option. In fact, three of us in town pledged that if one of us suffered a job loss, the other two would offer part-time work to keep the family going until a new job was found.

In fact, I once heard Cheryl tell someone that the thing I was most proud of in my career was that I never missed a paycheck. Those times weren't better or worse, just different.

The past five years have been difficult times economically. That has been especially true for golf. The crisis has led to more firings, layoffs, downsizing and cutbacks than any of us were used to or even could have imagined. Getting fired has happened to the best of people, and tough financial circumstances don't reflect their competence or past successes.

Getting fired happens to even the best of people, and too often those suffering this fate don't know why.

A lawyer friend of mine once told me that there is nothing in the constitution that states you have to let someone work for you or that you cannot fire an employee. Also, employers do not have to provide a reason for letting someone go and there isn't a requirement for any advance notice. Granted, laws and

rules have to be followed, but even they don't mitigate the shock that often follows a pink slip.

I have to admit, there are endless examples – both in our industry and outside of it, as well – of good people getting fired and moving on to bigger and better things. A very public example is NFL coach Andy Reid; who was fired from the Philadelphia Eagles, hired by the Kansas City Chiefs and enjoyed some great success this past season. In this very public example everybody won.

The late Wayne Otto had an interesting take on the subject of long-term employment. Wayne spent decades at the same club. He noted that if you aggravate four or five club members a year, at the end of 20 years you've amassed quite a crowd that doesn't think you are all that great anymore. Sure enough, Wayne was invited to move along; the generous retirement he received didn't salve the emotional blow he felt.

Two firings this past fall really affected me. One individual is a highly respected senior golf course superintendent here in Wisconsin. The other was a well-regarded and well-liked staff person at the Golf Course Superintendents Association

of America (GCSAA). My colleague had just completed an involved, multi-year course renovation project. The course turned out well, from our point of view. One morning this past autumn he arrived at work and was greeted by several club officials who informed him the facility was "going in a different direction." All of this despite decades of superb work and a track record of dedicated service.

What happened? Did he suddenly become stupid, lazy and incompetent? I hardly think so. And wouldn't it be useful to know what "going in a different direction" means? Why cannot someone suffering such a fate at least be given reasons for the firing?

So, in his late 50s, my friend is looking for work in a tough economy and an even tougher market for turf managers. Scores of us have our ears and eyes open to try to help him, but right now for him it's a game of wait and see.

The other event that has me baffled and upset is the GCSAA decision to let a senior staff person go because they, too, decided they were "going in a different direction."

I have known this individual for 18 years and relied on his help on more than one occasion. This person has always been pleasant, professional and very capable in his position. My dismay is tempered by the trust and respect I have for GCSAA President Pat Finlan, CGCS. Our friendship goes back to his days as a chapter publications editor, and I know Pat to be a top-notch individual.

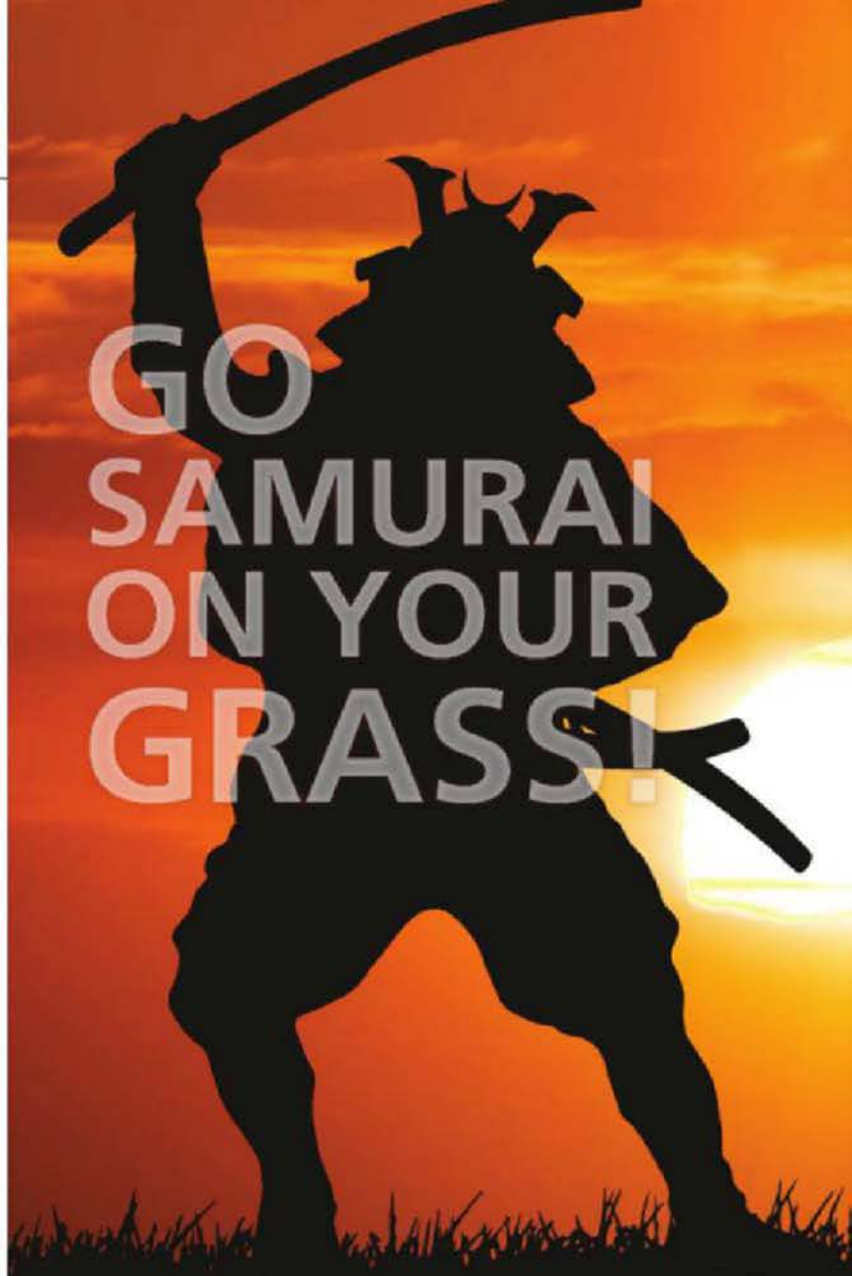
Still, I have to wonder why a GCSAA employee cannot be told something other than the "we're going in a different direction" story line. This individual, I should add, is grateful for his time at GCSAA and speaks glowingly of the superintendents whom he's worked with and interacted with over the years.

The sad thing is that my revered professional organization is guilty of exactly the same thing so many of us resent. If an organization is indeed "going in a different direction," then why can't an employee go in that direction, as well?

I have to wonder whether we have reached a point in our society and businesses where years of productive service don't amount to much of anything?

Maybe I'm somewhat naïve and sentimental about the issue of firing people – a Pollyanna of sorts. I do understand the discretion an employer has in selecting and maintaining a top notch professional turf management staff. Likewise, there can be a slew of complicated legal issues I do not appreciate and can loom large in our overly litigious society.

Finally, I do understand and appreciate the importance of moving on without anger or shame or embarrassment, as difficult as it might be to progress forward. But it is still heart breaking and gut wrenching when it sniffs of unfairness and happens to someone you know and respect. When it happens without reason, it all seems so unjustly cruel. GCI



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