CONFLICT Resolution

Fighting and frustration can actually be channeled into positive outcomes. It's just a matter of learning the proper skills

By Becky Mollenkamp

Conflict at a golf course is as common as the two-putt. Whether between employees, with a customer or among management, dealing with conflict is a routine part of a superintendent's job. And "it's not a fun part of the job," says Michael Nelson, superintendent of Dacotah Ridge Golf Course in Morton, Minn.

Believe it or not, fighting and frustration can actually be channeled into positive outcomes. All it takes is a good understanding of what conflict is, how it starts and how to address it. Unfortunately, many managers never learn the skills needed to handle negative situations properly.

"Most people think of conflict as a bad thing because they don't know how to handle it," says Barbara Pachter, author of The Power of Positive Confrontation (Marlowe & Company, 2001). "If you know what to do, you're bound to have a better outcome."

Simply put, conflict is an opposition of ideas: it can be constructive or destructive. In fact, the Chinese pictogram for conflict has two distinct elements — one meaning danger and the other meaning opportunity. The form conflict takes is up to the people involved.

Many managers succumb to the temptation to avoid conflict, including James Bade, superintendent of Somerset Country Club in St. Paul, Minn. A self-proclaimed "people pleaser," Bade says dealing with drama is his least favorite part of the job.

"Can't we all just get along?" Bade jokes. "I often procrastinate when it comes to solving conflict. I try to avoid it, but that doesn't work. It can keep me awake at night. I tend to internalize conflict, which is not a very good thing. It gets pent up inside, waiting to explode."

As Bade has learned, unresolved conflict can lead to negative confrontation, including verbal or physical fights.

"Avoidance may seem easier initially until the situation gets so bad that it can't be avoided," Pachter says. "The biggest mistake managers make is not knowing there is an alternative to avoiding. They can avoid or confront aggressively or the third alternative is positive confrontation."

Instead of looking at conflict as a win-lose situation, managers need to learn how to create win-win solutions. To do that, managers must understand that conflict is not an obstacle to organizational progress; it is actually the key to moving forward.

"Progress is really a result of conflict resolution," says Robert Milligan, author of Human Resource Management for Golf Course Superintendents (GCSAA, 2002). "Can you have change without conflict? No. It's not hard to make a decision if you have only one option, but if you have more than one then there's conflict."

When employees fight

The most common source of conflict for any business is squabbles among the staff. As every
superintendent knows, golf course crews can fight about anything and everything — language barriers that lead to miscommunication, debates over work ethic or job assignments, even allegations of tool theft.

This is one time when avoiding may be the best response to conflict. Minor problems should be left to the employees to hash out among themselves.

"Chances are, you shouldn't intervene," Pachter says. "Just keep throwing it back to them. If they really can't resolve it, you may want to bring them together and help resolve it."

When a manager must step in and guide conflict resolution, there are four methods (besides avoiding) he or she can use. "Tailor your response to the situation," Milligan advises.

- **Competing:** The most-assertive and least-cooperative style, competing means meeting one's own needs at the expense of the other party's. Sounds awful? Actually, this method is a must when your way is the only correct solution, such as issues of safety or potential legal problems for the business.

- **Accommodating:** At the opposite end of the spectrum from competing, accommodation means placing the other party's needs above one's own. This method can leave a manager feeling resentful, but it can be beneficial during a conflict with an employee because it helps build rapport and trust.

- **Collaborating:** By being both cooperative and assertive, managers can collaborate to satisfy the needs of both parties in a dispute. This style takes time and energy, but it is the best style to use when it is essential that both parties agree on a resolution.

- **Compromising:** When collaboration fails, managers may need to compromise to find a

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solution that at least partially deals with both parties’ concerns.

“Sometimes you have to use multiple styles,” Milligan says. “You have to be assertive
to get them to resolve the issue. Once they agree to do that, you become more collabora-
tive or even accommodating to build good-will for the next time there is conflict.”

When a superintendent gets involved in an employee conflict, the most important first
step is to listen. The dispute at hand is usually just a superficial symptom of a much deeper
and long-standing problem. The manager’s job is to play detective and uncover the root
causes, Milligan says. Don’t make the common mistake of responding only to the trig-
gering event.

“The key is to listen to your employees and acknowledge their feelings,” Nelson says.
“Often, the offending employee is unaware of the conflict. By listening intently first and then
talking, you are able to get to the root of the problem.”

Be sensitive to language barriers. If you have non-English speakers, find helpful ways to
address their conflict. Glenn Perry, certified superintendent at Rolling Hills Country Club
in Wilton, Conn., has a mostly Spanish-speaking staff. He is not fluent in Spanish so he uses
an interpreter to help him resolve employee disputes.

“To solve the conflict, I go to each party separately with a senior staff member to
explain the situation to me,” Perry says. “I talk it over with each party and come up with a
solution. By continuing to work together, the conflict usually gets resolved.”

You’re the boss

The dynamics of dispute change when the battle is between employer and employee. There
is an unavoidable power struggle in these situations, so they must be handled delicately.

“You come with an unequal power play because you can say, ‘No,’ ” Pachter says. “Rank
has it privileges, and that’s the way it should be. But if you want to be a good boss, you need
to hear what your employees have to say and not assume you are always right.”

Common sources of manager-employee conflict include employees who break company
policy (absenteeism, tardiness, excessive breaks), employee concerns about fairness (job sched-
uling, pay equity, favoritism), and communication problems between boss and employee.

When you have a problem with an employee, don’t wait to address it. The longer it festers, the more frustrated you will get and the more strained your relationship with the employee becomes. Don’t expect the employee to come to you or to even be aware there is a problem.

Pull the employee aside; don’t confront him or her in front of others. Wait until you are
calm and the employee is not in the middle of a task.

“Keep things professional, not personal,” Milligan says. “`Never use ‘you’ statements, like
‘you are wrong’ or ‘you make me mad.’ Keep the focus on the issue, not on the person.”

Likewise, maintain an open-door policy for those times when an employee has a problem
with you.

“I encourage my employees to come to me with any problems they encounter on the job,”
Nelson says. “If it involves me, I would like to hear about it. I’m not perfect, and I would like
to listen to him if an employee feels he has a problem.”

Nelson has it right — listening is the key. Do not get defensive, but do ask for clarification
so you understand the complaint. Acknowledge the person’s feelings and do your best to explain the situation or fix the problem.

Confrontation may be difficult and uncomfortable, but it can lead to good results,
especially when handled with tact.

“Usually, it only affects the relationship in a positive way when the misunderstanding
has been cleared up,” Perry says. “It is not a good idea to harbor grudges because the
employees are ultimately your best resource and control the outcome of the final product.”

Giving employees the power of confrontation (even against you) is not the same as turning
over your authority as the boss.

“Most of our intuition is that there is a limited amount of power,” Milligan says. “If I give
you some power, I have less. Managers have to get past that. Power is not limited. One
thing that leads to immediate failure is too little self-confidence in your ability to deal with
conflict. These are learnable skills. We can’t all be Tiger Woods, but we can all be
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Conflict Resolution

"Supervisors should strive to use informal power because people resent formal power."

ROBERT MILLIGAN

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better golfers. It’s the same with these skills.”

Milligan suggests taking classes or attending seminars on conflict. Also, superintendents can find confidants in superintendents from other towns, and call them up and discuss these issues as they arise. Sometimes you just need someone to confirm that you are doing the right thing, Milligan adds.

Peer problems

Another stressful situation for a superintendent is when he or she has conflict with a peer, boss or customer. When you can’t fire the source of stress, how do you deal with it?

Last fall, one of Perry’s peers was playing in a charity event at his club. The weather was inclement and the course was unplayable so the outing was canceled. The visiting superintendent demanded to know who was in charge. Perry was off-site so his assistant dealt with the angry man. The superintendent demanded to see proof of the course’s condition and, when Perry’s assistant showed him the puddles, he became rude and made inappropriate comments.

“I wish I could have handled the situation immediately, but instead I investigated and then made a phone call to him the next morning,” Perry says. “I had to call to show that I support my assistant and the decisions he makes when I am not on the property. After listening to him and explaining my objections, he apologized.”

Superintendents have two types of power at their disposal, Milligan says. There is the formal power that gives them authority over their employees, and there are informal powers that they can use to influence people over whom they have no authority. Examples of informal powers include charisma, positive feedback and expertise.

Although Perry had no formal power over his offending peer, he got the apology because the facts were on his side and he approached his peer with confidence but without arrogance.

“Supervisors should strive to use informal power because people resent formal power,” Milligan says. “We ought to be leading by our ability to influence people with informal power.”

And when the conflict is with a customer? They are always right, aren’t they?

“The customer is always right, but there is a line that can be crossed,” Pachter says.

Like when the golfer verbally attacked one of Nelson’s staff members because the course was being aerated. When Nelson confronted the member, he denied saying anything and called the staffer a liar. “I almost blew a gasket, but had enough sense to just walk away,” Nelson says.

That was the smart move. Although it is OK to let a member know his or her behavior is not acceptable, the best bet is to simply walk away if someone is screaming or out of control.

“Golf course managers often have as many customers as members,” Bade says. “I tell myself that it is their golf course and they pay the bills. But sometimes it is a matter of educating them about goals and what you are trying to accomplish.”

Perry does his best to eliminate membership conflict before it begins with active communication through newsletters, the club’s Web site, bulletin boards, and daily personal appearances on the first tee, in the pro shop and clubhouse.

“By being available, approachable and forward-thinking, most conflict can be stopped with intelligent responses before it starts,” he says.

Grace Under Fire

When conflict leads to confrontation, things can get ugly. It’s particularly difficult when you are on the receiving end of a verbal attack. When the tirade comes as a surprise, it’s easy to get thrown off balance and say or do things you’ll later regret.

If you are prepared to handle such a situation, it’s easier to remain composed and act appropriately. Follow these guidelines from Barbara Pachter, the author of The Power of Positive Confrontation (Marlowe & Company, 2001), the next time an employee, customer or peer puts you on the defensive:

- **Agree:** Agree with what the person says but add additional information that turns the comment around, such as, “You’re right. We did spend a lot money because it’s important to our customers.”
- **Clarify:** Ask questions to get more information. “Why are you saying that?” “Tell me more about your concern.” Probing makes you less likely to appear wounded, and it buys you time to calm down.
- **Acknowledge:** Reiterate what the person has said, then use and, not but, to provide clarifying information. “There may be some truth to that, and we are looking at the numbers.”
- **Disagree:** Be polite but firm. You can say, “I disagree, and here’s why…”
- **Postpone:** Sometimes it’s best to talk to the person privately or at a later time. Say something like, “You obviously have strong feelings. Let’s get together at the end of the day so we can discuss this issue in more depth.”

Becky Mollenkamp
Canterbury Golf Club superintendent Terry Bonar believes the best way to manage employees is to show your appreciation of them.

By Larry Aylward, Editor

It’s no wonder Terry Bonar has endured more than 40 years at Cleveland’s Canterbury Golf Club, the past 20 years as its superintendent. The easy-going 63-year-old Bonar is as highly regarded as the 1921 design, which is ranked in the top 100 classic courses in America.

Nowhere is Bonar’s popularity more evident than on the golf course maintenance staff he manages. Bonar’s employees welcome him like a cool breeze on scorching July day.

Consider that the four veteran members of Bonar’s 12-person staff have nearly 75 years between them at Canterbury. They don’t want to leave Canterbury because it has evolved into more than just a place they go to work every day. It has become a second home, thanks in part to Bonar.

“It’s like home here; it’s like family,” says
first assistant superintendent Ed Smith, who has worked with Bonar for nearly 15 years. “Everybody is close, and we have no desire to leave.”

Smith’s impressions reflect Bonar’s basic but influential management style. Bonar’s style boils down to treating everyone with respect and dignity, and he does that through different means.

On the professional side, Bonar encourages crew members to learn new skills continually. (His secretary, Kelly Lanckiewicz, can mow a mean green). On the social side, Bonar often cooks breakfast for his crew on cold winter mornings.

“You try to be fair and treat people with respect,” says Bonar, who sports a long but neatly trimmed gray beard. “I just want to make their jobs as enjoyable as possible. It can’t be all head-down, full-blast and double-time without some fun.”

Chris Sulyok, the course’s 26-year-old second assistant superintendent, says Bonar has shown unwavering faith in him to learn and improve since he joined the course eight years ago. “He gave me the freedom to do things I thought I could do,” Sulyok adds.

Eric Moses, who has worked at Canterbury for 30 years, says Bonar has always been supportive. “It helps me to know he has confidence in me,” the 49-year-old says.

Kim Stegh, who has worked on Bonar’s crew for 20 years, has looked for other jobs but can’t find anything better. She says Bonar is a flexible leader who listens to employees’ ideas and concerns.

While Bonar expects his crew to work hard, he urges them to have lives outside of Canterbury. The crew works from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and Stegh says Bonar makes sure they quit on time. “We’re willing to work overtime if we have to, but we’re not here until dark every day,” she adds.

You’ve heard the philosophy that bosses shouldn’t be overly friendly with their employees, but that logic is not heeded at Canterbury. One thing Bonar’s crew members like about him is that he makes himself available to them, even if they want to discuss personal matters.

The 34-year-old Smith says he and Bonar have a father-and-son-like relationship. They attend turf meetings and sporting events together, and play golf together.

“I’m very proud to work for Terry,” Smith says. “I can tell him anything.”

When Bonar hears what Smith has said, he chimes in: “It works both ways. I can tell Ed anything.”

Bonar also believes strongly in providing feedback. He praises his crew members and wants them to know how much he appreciates them.

“He’s my right arm,” Bonar says of Smith. “He’s always up. You never see him walking around with his head down — never. He comes in every morning ready to go. He’d just as soon pick up a shovel and dig a trench 100 yards long. He’s that kind of guy.”

Bonar calls Stegh an amazing and multi-talented person. She does everything from planting and tending flowers to grinding mower reels.

“She’s an asset to the crew,” says Bonar, noting that Stegh commands crew members’ respect. “They know that she knows what she’s talking about.”

While eager to reward a crew member with an “attaboy,” Bonar doesn’t hesitate to express concern if a crew member is not performing up to task. For instance, Bonar guards against complacency, especially with the people who have worked at the course for a long
Paying His Respects

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time, including himself. He says he owes it to
the club to keep the staff motivated and per-
forming at a high level.

"Complacency is our biggest enemy," Bonar
says. "I'm cognizant not to get complacent.
You can't drop your standards, or everybody
else will pass you by. This is a great club, and
we need to be moving forward."

That said, Bonar strives to make sure his
employees are happy in their roles. He did that
with Stegh, who started on the crew in the
mid-1980s and eventually became Bonar's first
assistant. But Stegh wanted a change after
about two years at the post.

"Kim didn't do anything wrong," Bonar
says. "She just didn't want to be in manage-
ment anymore, and I didn't want to lose her."

Stegh, who's interested in horses, wanted
to work on a private estate where she could
tend to the animals and the grounds. Bonar
assigned her to the crew at an hourly rate until
she could find such a job. More than 10 years
later, Stegh is still on the crew and couldn't be
happier. Her peers view her as the jack-of-all-
trades. "She likes what she does, and she's good
at it," Bonar says.

Bonar says he has developed a credible rep-
tutation with his employees, which he strives
to sustain. That means being straight with
them. If Bonar doesn't know the answer to a
question, he admits it.

"I would never jeopardize my credibility," he says. "It's the most valuable thing I have."

Bonar displays an egalitarian spirit as well.
When Canterbury's maintenance facility
underwent a facelift about 12 years ago, the
project's architect told Bonar he could de-
sign a spacious private office for him. Bonar
said thanks but no thanks. He wanted to share
the office with his two assistants.

"We need to be in the same office to sit
down in the morning and make plans for
the day," Bonar says. "We interact a lot."

Bonar is also a modest man. He has learned
not to let his ego get in the way of making
decisions. He says Mother Nature often re-
minds him of who's in charge.

"Just when you think you know what you're
doing, you have a dead green," Bonar says.
"This is a humbling profession, and I've been
humbled many times."

Bonar's management style rubs off on crew
members. On a recent morning, they talked
openly about how much they respect one
another and are happy to help each other in
their roles. They're also friends.

"That's why I like working here," Sulyok
says. "Everybody knows everybody on a work
level, but we know each other on personal lev-
els, too."

Bonar, who graduated from Penn State
University in 1961, doesn’t look his age. He appears healthy and tries to stay that way. Bonar, who once weighed 305 pounds and now weighs about 190, works out about four times a week. He can still hit the ball, too. He sports a nine handicap.

In his career, Bonar has hosted several big tournaments, including the PGA Championship in 1973, the U.S. Amateur in 1979 and several top senior tournaments throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He has spent his entire career at Canterbury.

Bonar slumps in a chair with his hands in his lap. He wears a black baseball cap pulled down tight over his head. “I don’t have a long time left,” he announces in his deep and neighborly voice. “But I’m not ready to retire. I love Canterbury, and I love the people.”

Even Bonar is amazed at his lengthy stay at the course. “It’s been a good ride,” he says with a grin.

The warm sun shines in the modest maintenance facility’s window. Bonar gazes up at nothing while talking about what has enabled him to stay on this ride for so long. But the talk is not about himself.

“The secret is to surround yourself with good people,” Bonar says convincingly. “I’m just pointing the way.”

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**Golfdom Staffer Offers Fond Memories of a Summer Spent on Terry Bonar’s Crew**

Editor’s note: Pat Roberts, Golfdom’s national sales manager, spent the summer of 1988 working on Terry Bonar’s crew at Canterbury Golf Club. Roberts offers his recollection of that summer.

I could have been a caddy like all my buddies. The money and the hours beat the daylights out of the grounds crew. But from the moment I shook his hand when he hired me to my last day on the job, Terry Bonar was different. I was a 16-year-old goofball who scalped greens with the best of them, but Terry treated me with the same respect that he treated everyone on the staff. If I made a mistake, he would show me how to get it right the next time. If I had a question, he would make the time to answer it. There were full-timers on the staff who had been with Terry for a long time. There were also seasonal people like me. I figured we’d be relegated to digging holes or sweeping cart paths. I could not have been more wrong. We worked right along side everyone else.

The people on the crew did everything they could to the best of their abilities. We knew that Terry expected perfection because his bosses (the members) demanded it. Terry worked hard and expected us to do the same. We did.

Terry never raised his voice or treated me like the scalper I was. He treated the crew with respect, and the crew treated him and the course the same way. I loved every second of working on the course that summer.
SUPER
Service

Judy Hutt, owner of Shadow Valley Golf Course in Idaho, is known for her terrific treatment of customers

By Larry Aylward, Editor

t’s Monday morning, and Judy Hutt is trying to wake up. The tall and twiggy 53-year-old brunette sits at a tiny table in the sunlit concourse of the Tampa Convention Center and orders a steaming cup of coffee.

But Hutt, the spirited owner and general manager of Shadow Valley Golf Course in Boise, Idaho, doesn’t need a jolt of caffeine to stimulate her senses. All one has to do is start talking about the golf business to get her roused.

Hutt, who was in Tampa to attend the National Golf Course Owners Association’s annual convention held earlier this year, is asked how she got her start in the business nearly 31 years ago. She tells the story about Shadow Valley, built in the foothills in southern Idaho, and then offers commentary on a range of subjects, including the state of the industry.

“Do you know what I think is wrong with this industry?” Hutt states, her piercing blue eyes widening. “People trip over dollars trying to save pennies. They’re so worried about the dollar they make today that they don’t worry about the dollar they’re going to make the next day, the next day and the next day.”

About 15 minutes pass. The coffee, its steam diminishing, sits untouched. One wonders if Hutt, who’s wide-awake now, remembers that it’s there. But that’s Hutt for you. Start talking about the golf industry and the passion begins to flow from her like a swift stream after a fierce rainstorm.

Hutt is blessed with a sturdy pair of vocal cords and likes to use them. She stands out at meetings such as the NGCOA convention because she asks a lot of questions and gives many opinions. But she says she’s not one who speaks up just to be noticed.

“I told myself before I came to this conference that I wasn’t going to talk as much,” she says. “I have a tendency to [talk too much], but I never want to dominate.”

Hutt adores the golf industry, but not because it’s such a time-honored sport. Hutt, who seldom plays the game, enjoys the industry for its people. She can’t get enough of them, even the rude ones. She’ll give her all to get the brusque people to smile. And the whiners? Hutt just looks at them as the ultimate customer-service challenge.

Customer service is Hutt’s forte. She’s a stickler for it. In fact, her attitude toward customer service is what made her a name in the business and among her peers.

“She’s one of the most progressive owners in the business,” says Mike Hughes, executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association. “Other association members perceive her as one of the real innovators.”

Hutt entered the golf business by accident in the early 1970s. Her parents owned an alfalfa farm and opted to turn it into a golf course. Then they asked their seven kids if they wanted to help run it. Judy, who has a bachelor’s degree in fashion merchandising, lived in Washington at the time and managed an upscale retail store. She decided to come home and help her family operate the course.

“None of us knew anything about golf,”
Hutt says, "Nobody in the family knew a green from a tee or a putter from a driver."

Business was tough in the beginning, but improved mainly because of the Hutt family's focus on satisfying customers. Interestingly, Hutt believes the golf course survived the early days because none of the Hutts played golf and devoted all their time to running the business.

"We worked really hard, and we listened to the customers," Hutt says.

Today, the course is a partnership between Hutt and her mother and siblings. But Hutt is the only family member who works full-time. A brother and sister work part-time.

Because of the large number of family-owned golf courses, there are many women involved in the golf business. But there are few women like Hutt who take such up-front roles. There might be no other woman as devoted to the business as Hutt, who jokingly refers to herself as the "token babe" in the industry.

"She always stretching the boundaries of what she can do," Hughes says. "She's definitely someone to listen to and admire."

Bill Fountain, operating partner for The Majestic at Lake Walden golf course and a frequent attendee of the NGCOA show, doesn't know Hutt personally but says he's impressed with her charisma.

"She's a dynamic lady, and she has great ideas," Fountain says. "She knows the business as well as anybody from an operations standpoint."

Fountain says he's impressed with Hutt's marketing ideas about gaining new customers and satisfying current ones. "She's done a lot of great things and has been ahead of the curve for several years as far as customer service," he adds.

Indeed, Hutt and her staff are frequent winners in the NGCOA's annual Idea Fair. Criteria for submitting a concept in the Idea Fair is that it must be "an innovative, revenue-generating or cost-saving idea" that was implemented and yielded a return on investment. Often, the ideas are related directly to customer service.

In 2001, Hutt and Shadow Valley won the Idea Fair for their "G.O.D. for a Day" program. Prior to opening on weekends that playing season, the Shadow Valley staff took all the names of players who phoned in reservations and put their names in a hat. A winner was drawn and named Guest of the Day. Everyone on the staff — from starters to marshals to golf course maintenance workers — were made aware of the Guest of the Day and treated that person like a... well... a god. The Guest of the Day, who was given a hat with a logo and the initials G-O-D, received a free round of golf, practice balls, lunch and drinks.

Where does Hutt come up with these ideas?

"My mind is like a ping-pong ball," she says. "Sometimes I have a hard time sleeping at night."

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Super Service

Judy Hutt (third from left) says she couldn't operate the course without input from key members of her staff, including Jan Ashley-Schmall, deli manager; Greg Hunnicutt, superintendent; Suzie Lund, assistant manager; T.J. Gomez, head pro; René Hadley, assistant superintendent; and Jean Smith, golf shop manager.

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One of Hutt's favorite books is T. Scott Gross' *Positively Outrageous Service*, which she says brings customer service down to an elementary level everyone can understand.

Hutt is concerned about everything related to serving customers, from the condition of the bunkers to how many times the phone rings in the clubhouse before someone answers it.

"I like to have it acknowledged by the third ring," she says. "When I call someone, I count how many times it rings. And when someone answers, I'll tell that person, 'Do you realize that it was 22 rings before you picked up the phone and acknowledged me?'"

Excellent service breeds high expectations, Hutt believes, but that's what she wants. When a golfer drives into Shadow Valley's parking lot, Hutt wants that person to know what to expect from Shadow Valley. If a golfer has no expectations, he or she may as well have bad expectations, Hutt says.

There are certain "musts" the course strives for, Hutt says. They are a clean clubhouse, a well-manicured course, cold water in the coolers, fresh water in the ball washers, an on-time tee time and an 18-hole round in less than 4.5 hours.

Greg Hunnicutt, superintendent of Shadow Valley, says Hutt is passionate about the business. "The thing I admire about her most is that she takes the course to heart," Hunnicutt says.

Hutt instructs the golf course maintenance staff to be courteous to players. In fact, she believes the maintenance staff plays an integral role in the customer-service process because players often encounter them on the course.

Hutt's philosophy is that Shadow Valley is in the entertainment business, and people play the course to have a good time. "And if they don't have a good time, I'm going to give them their money back," she vows.

Hutt believes the customers — and not she — should make most of the decisions regarding Shadow Valley's business. That philosophy stems from wanting to separate her business from the competition.

Says Hutt: "When people call us and ask what time we open, I tell them, 'An hour before you want to get here.' When they ask what time we close, I answer, 'An hour after you leave.'"

Hutt realizes that marketing is personal. She prefers one-on-one marketing and often takes a nondescript approach. For instance, a golfer comes in the clubhouse after playing 18 holes on a hot summer day. Thirsty, he walks up to the counter, lays down $2 and orders a cold beer. Hutt gives him the beer, pushes the money back and tells him the drink is on her today.

"I do that all the time," Hutt says. "I tell everyone on my staff to do that. I would rather buy 1,000 golfers a cold beer each on a hot day than put a $500 ad in the newspaper that says come and play Shadow Valley."

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Super Service

“Super Service would rather buy 1,000 golfers a cold beer each on a hot day than put a $500 ad in the newspaper.”
JUDY HUTT

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As part of the customer service plan, Hutt and her staff seek opinions from their customers constantly about how to improve the course, which charges $25 for 18 holes during the week and $33 on the weekend.

The process entails an annual poll sent to customers to ask them what changes they would like to see. We're not talking small things, like a new hot dog brand in the deli. We're talking big things, like course renovations. One year, respondents said Shadow Valley needed bunkers, so Hutt had them built.

In one survey a golfer wrote, “You're not my favorite course, but because of the condition you keep it in and because your staff is so friendly, it's where I choose to play.”

Hutt says she puts money back into Shadow Valley every year. “We make sure that when we open our doors every year, there's something new and tangible they can see.”

Hutt says her business savvy is the result of experience. She admits she has learned a few lessons the hard way.

“I'm not saying I've always done it right,” she says. “But I think we're doing it right now.”

Hunnicutt, who has been with Shadow Valley for about 10 years, says Hutt has learned a lot about the business in that time. For instance, Hunnicutt says Hutt “ruffled the feathers” of some sales and service people by trying to get them to flat-out lower their prices on products. But Hunnicutt says Hutt has learned that such negotiating strategies weren't good business. “She negotiates differently now,” he says.

A few hours have passed, and the sun has risen higher in the cloudless Florida sky. It's time for Hutt to leave for another appointment. But before she goes, she has more than a passing remark to say about her staff. Hutt says she couldn't run the course without key input from staff members, from the pro to the superintendent to the deli manager, who are heavily involved in making decisions.

“Sometimes they say you're only as good as
the people you surround yourself with," Hutt says. "We have some really good people, and most of the decisions made are group decisions."

Hutt credits head professional T.J. Gomez, who joined the course about a year ago, with helping spark Shadow Valley's business last year. Business has been slow at Shadow Valley the past few years, but Hutt says the course posted an increase in 2003 for the first time in three years because of increased corporate-outing business secured by Gomez.

Gomez has a candid relationship with Hutt. He's not afraid to disagree with her, but he knows she's the boss and respects her.

"Everybody knows where she stands and what she believes in," Gomez says. "If she doesn't like an idea, she'll tell you. If she loves an idea, she'll tell you."

Hunnicutt describes Hutt as a tough boss, but one who is honest and approachable. He also says Hutt has shown more gratitude to her staff the past few years and is paying staff members better as well as communicating to them how important they are to the operation.

Hutt thinks most golfers perceive her as a good businesswoman, although she believes men think of her as a "demanding" good businesswoman. "I have that perception because I'm hard-nosed, and I'm a woman in a man's world," she says.

Hutt, whose hobby is riding horses, doesn't play much golf, but insists she knows the game's ins and outs from talking to players.

"I've been doing this for more than 30 years," she says. "I know enough about the game to talk the game."

She also has a pair of eyes in her husband of 15 years, Ron, who is a five-handicap and plays the course several times a week. He keeps Hutt apprised of problems on the course.

"He's the biggest complainer in the world," Hutt says with a chuckle. "He'll let me know if something is not right on the course."

As she does with other customers, Hutt will listen intently to her husband's concerns.

"I don't think I know anymore than anybody else does," she says. "But I always listen to customers."

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I spent a recent lazy Saturday afternoon watching Master and Commander: Far Side of the World on DVD. The idea was to forget about work for a day, but while watching a particular scene in the movie I found myself reflecting on some of my managerial techniques.

The scene involved Russell Crowe's character, Captain Aubrey, reprimanding one of his lieutenants for not reprimanding an insubordinate sailor. The lieutenant, frustrated, said he meant to reprimand the sailor, but couldn't find the right words. Then he confessed that none of the men liked him, and he found it difficult to lead them. He also confessed he had difficulty making friends among the crew. Captain Aubrey told him he wasn't there to make friends. He must be strict, but not a tyrant. Above all, he must have their respect, because without their respect he'd never be a leader.

I couldn't help but transfer this situation to that of the golf course superintendent and his crew (I'm sure it will do absolutely no good whatsoever to mention here that the lieutenant ends up killing himself, but there you go).

I found myself wondering what my crew members think of me as a leader, so I decided to ask them.

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A ‘Leading’ Question

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...ing the fact that I need my crew to help me achieve the goal.

In my own case, I know I have my crew’s respect, but to what end? How has that respect been earned, and what other feelings accompany it? Do they consider me a tyrant? Unreasonable? Willing to jump in the ditch with them when the going gets tough? A friend? Someone to whom they can tell the truth in tough situations? After asking myself some of these questions, I suddenly realized I couldn’t answer any of them.

I’m pretty sure none of us consciously gets into this business to actually become a manager. When asked what I do for a living, I’ve never answered, “I’m a golf course manager.” It’s not really what I or many of my peers consider ourselves to be. We are superintendents — growers and fine tuners of grass. The managing aspect of the job is something that’s been thrown into the mix. As much as we sometimes wish it wasn’t, it really can’t be avoided. Often, because it’s in the back of our minds, it tends to get overlooked. This, I’m beginning to realize, is a mistake.

After the movie (great ending, by the way), I set about trying to answer some of the questions I posed to myself:

Do they consider me a tyrant?
I have my moments, there is no doubt, of what I like to call “focus.” When in focus, I tend to see the problem, the solution and the means

without often considering the human element. This perhaps is my greatest weakness as a manager. Often, I think I forget I have allies — people there to help me with the problem, not add to it.

Am I unreasonable?
The answer again is more than likely not one I’m really going to like. I must admit that this can be the case. Never ask of someone more than you are willing to ask of yourself. But even, I think, not even that. Never ask of someone more than you are willing to ask of yourself when you are in his or her situation. I think that’s a valuable distinction that needs to be remembered.

A friend?
I once worked for a superintendent who made a specific point one day to tell me he wasn’t there to make friends. He even went to the length of telling me he was a better superintendent because he didn’t befriend anyone on the crew. I must admit, I have followed this advice over the years, although maybe not always consciously. I was friendly, perhaps, but not a friend.

Recently, I’ve changed this philosophy, if ever so slightly. I still do believe a certain arm’s length separation must exist between manager and employee. But I’m starting to feel there’s nothing wrong with the occasional golf outing together with the guys, or even a pick-up game of hoops and a refreshment afterwards. It’s a delicate line, but try to keep a distance without seeming like you are.

Someone to whom they can tell the truth in tough situations?
This is similar to the friend question, but with a slight twist. There are going to be situations that arise with every employee that involve that employee’s personal life. It can’t be avoided. Everyone is human, subject to the trials and tribulations that come with the package. These personal issues, these life issues, are going to come to your golf course sooner or later — with some employees more than others, and with some employees a lot more than others. You will have to deal with them, no doubt.

But one thing that may help is the ability and willingness of employees to confide in you the truth about problems that come up. Faking illnesses or vehicle troubles or whatever

Never ask of someone more than you are willing to ask of yourself when you are in his or her situation.
else they may come up with instead of telling you the truth can never result in a positive outcome for an employee or employer. Maybe an employee is simply burned out and needs some time off. Maybe he’s having troubles with a spouse and needs to spend some time to work it out. Having someone with the confidence to confront you with honesty is half the battle to helping him or her be a more productive employee.

When I got back to work after taking off the weekend, I approached a few employees to give me some feedback on what they thought of me as a manager. After some initial reluctance, I received a few useful pointers.

One was to be more open to their suggestions. I’m as guilty as the next guy in thinking I know all of the answers. Open your mind and actually listen to people. They wanted to feel that their ideas might actually be useful to the operation of the golf course.

Another pointer was echoed by nearly everyone I asked, so I took it seriously. “Empower them to solve problems.” Give them the tools (not just literal tools) to solve the problems they encounter. That could mean fixing a scalped plug, communicating with the pro shop or addressing a disgruntled golfer. Have the confidence to let them solve problems, and give them the ability to do so.

I think it’s inevitable in the course of one’s golf course management career to question his or her abilities. No one is perfect, and no one should ever be so confident in his or her own abilities to never question them. As important as your knowledge of growth regulators, ET rates and topdressing practices, you should consider the facet of your management skills. It may not seem as important, but it is.

I think the one thing within your management arsenal that you should remember is to make sure you have the respect of your employees. Without that, as Captain Aubrey said, you can never lead.

Furlong, superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Bellingham, Wash., can be reached at rf7500@aol.com

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