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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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? 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
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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