

Improving Your Professional Image as a Sports-Turf Manager

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A professional is someone who gets paid for being very good at something unique. He or she does it better than others and is perhaps the best. The purpose of my speech today is to help and inspire each of you to conduct yourselves in a more professional manner so your image as a group improves. I realize that many of you have come up through the ranks, and this presents a challenge when you become a superior rather than a peer. It's easy to say that you're still one of the guys, and you'd rather be a buddy than a boss. But you are the boss, and you have crossed the line into management. I contend that you now have the opportunity to call yourself a sports-turf manager. The manner in which you conduct yourself will be an example to others of your profession. Your chosen career needs people who act in a more professional way, and by doing so, we will all benefit.

People tend to emulate those who are successful. Therefore, I hope that there are many who emulate you. This process should begin with your employees. They have the first-hand opportunity to observe you, and you should be setting an example for them each day. I'll begin with the most obvious and that's your appearance. This means dressing sharply—not necessarily new clothes but certainly not tattered or in need of washing. I recall a young golf course superintendent who kept a fresh change of clothes on-hand for whenever he had to visit his club's business office. Therefore, when he confronted the club manager or the clubhouse staff, they responded to his business-like appearance and accorded him his due respect. He looked as important as he was. Sure, it was a hassle to freshen up and change clothers, but it paid off for him as he now manages a course in the Chicago area and makes over a hundred grand annually.

Improving your appearance means more than just wearing a suit when appropriate but wearing a suit that fits. Given time, body shapes change, and mine is an example of that. It's OK to wear your favorite tie but not the same tie for twenty-five years. Regular, periodic investments in business attire are indeed that—investments, and they do pay off. Be clean, don't stink, and groom yourself, even if it's the last hair on your head!

As a role model for your employees, adhere to all policies that prohibit the personal use of company property, such as pickups, trailers, and lawnmowers. If your crew knows that you take home a jar of Roundup or a bag of fertilizer, you can bet that some of them will too. Severely limit your personal phone calls while at work; adhere to your own policies. Expect your employees to be on time and stay until the job is done, just like you. Don't spend all of some days on a prolonged coffee break. Schedule and take at least one full-week's vacation and encourage others to do so also. And when you're away, don't check in too often; have confidence in your people.

It's best if you don't take your work-related problems home with you, Not taking your problems home, or to the bar, bowling alley, on a fishing trip or wherever you go to get away from it all. This is part of extending your professional conduct beyond the workplace.

A professional should have a sense of loyalty—you should give it and expect it. This is a two-way street. Some say that loyalty must be earned, but you should make it clear exactly for whom your people are working. A derogatory comment about anyone in your group is a negative toward everyone in your unit. From time-to time, you have to go to bat for your key employees in order to justify pay raises and advancement.. You have to recognize their potential and know when they've learned all that they can from you. That's when it's

time for them to move on to their own show. Sometimes you have to kick them out of the nest for their own good. Encourage them to keep their own files of commendatory letters and memos. This can be vital to any job searches since today, more and more, legal concerns prohibit us from giving recommendations to someone's prospective employer.

Be sensitive to others; don't openly criticize, or "bad-mouth," your superiors, your employees, past or present, competitors or peers in the industry, the industry itself, the regulators. Don't be jealous of others' successes, promotions, or pay raises.

In your interview and hiring practices, you should be explicit in your expectations and their opportunities for advancement. Be wary of any prospective employees who degrade their past jobs or employers, since they'll only say the same things about you and your operation after they move on to another job. A feeling common to very successful managers is having the guts to hire people that are talented enough to someday have your job. In other words, surrounding yourself with outstanding people can only make you look better.

Now I'd like to recognize the following professionals and ask them to please stand if they're here today: Peter Ace, Neil Campbell, Delbert Freeman, Jim Hoorn, Robert Ingelson, Bob Johnson, Richard Jurries, Jeff Kuretich, Stuart Pilcher, and Ron Westhouse. Ladies and Gentlemen, these standing before you are members of the Sports Turf Managers Association, which is a national organization whose mission statement reads as follows, "To be the leader in the sports turf industry, to enhance, promote and improve professionalism through excellence in communication, training, research, education and services." I applaud them for their exemplary action. This organization should model itself after the immensely successful Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and hope to achieve a fraction of its success. The GCSAA's dues are \$210 per year and you say with their salaries they can afford it. Don't you think there's a connection? Membership dues for the STMA are only \$75 annually. Michigan is tied for tenth place in member enrollment. Let's get that up, and to that end I have brought along a stack of membership application.

The rest of you here today are probably all members of the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation. You should encourage other colleagues to do the same. For it is in our area of expertise that we can really grow, and develop the clout that brings with it more and more outstanding speakers to address sports-turf topics in our conferences to come. Whether it be the STMA or the MTF, you should realize that being a member is more than just paying your dues. You should recognize other responsibilities such as recruiting new members, offering your site as a meeting place, and serving on committees and as an officer.

You should subscribe to and read publications, besides what the associations send. This would include magazines like Grounds Maintenance and Northern Turf Management. You might even try your hand at writing and submitting an article. Have them delivered to your workplace address so that others know that your job is an acknowledged profession.

Another manner in which you people here today are demonstrating your professional attitudes is that you are continuing the education process. Get all that you can out of these sessions. In other words, come away with more than just your recertification credits. Speaking of which, try to accumulate CEU's in a timely manner and not scramble toward the end of the year. I don't think that telling your boss that you have to attend an educational session or you'll lose your license is sending anyone a positive message about your managerial abilities. Anticipate these needs and request funds or budget accordingly. Make sure that everyone knows that education is a continuing and essential facet of your career development. Many of you would like to return to college on a full-time basis, as I was fortunate to do. But probably you can't, so encourage somewhat else to take the steps that are increasingly necessary to achieve success in this career.

Regarding laws and regulations, remember that they guarantee our right to perform a great deal of duties that are essential to successful turf management. Above all don't allow or even hint at non-compliance, seriously or jokingly. Stand firm with your superiors, equals, or subordinates whenever it comes up. Refuse to do this, and you forever compromise your standards and image. Commit one grave error and the entire industry could suffer.

For moral reasons as well as legal concerns, you should be safety conscious at all times, for yourself, employees, and bystanders. You should never ask an employee to do something that you yourself wouldn't do. And, in turn, don't do things that you wouldn't allow them to do. Once again, they should and will mimic you. Use rainy days to conduct training workshops that deal with safe practices both on and off the job site. Ask your suppliers to make presentations in order to increase your employees' knowledge of the products and equipment that they use. Invite company people from outside your immediate unit so that everyone becomes more aware of your organization's overall goals and functionalities.

It is my belief that the number one reason for job failure is poor communication, just as the Captain told "Cool Hand" Luke. You should communicate both orally and in writing. When giving oral instructions, make sure that your employees understand you exactly. Likewise, listen carefully to what they have to say.

Written communication includes letters, memos, and policy statements. Letters go to those outside your business, while memos should be restricted to communications within your organization. Please note that a memo is a written record that is not often misunderstood or forgotten as are oral communications. Policies, by their nature, are written and you should post them prominently and give every employee a copy. Annual reports, such as budget proposals, should be neat, easy to read, and without errors. Other written records should include annual performance reviews of each of the people that you supervise.

In order to better yourself or your situation, you should submit an annual self review that details your successes and shortcomings for the previous year. Request an audience with your boss, or bosses, where you can state your case. This annual presentation can be your best opportunity to impress your superiors with your professionalism. Treat this as an extremely important event, and prepare accordingly. A slide presentation of "before and after" pictures can be extremely effective. Along the same lines, these presentations can be reworked when needed for prospective employers. This is because as you build and improve your reputation, others will undoubtedly seek your services.

My most important bit of advice also involves communication, and that is to face problems when they arise, or at least acknowledge them openly. Don't let the people around you wonder if you know what's going on or what you're going to do about something. If you need time to think through things, then say so, but you should give a time period that you'll need to come to a decision. During this time, gather information and listen to others. Then, when you said you would, deal with it and move forward. From time to time in any business, tight situations arise, and you're the responsible person to whom those around you turn to for leadership. Sound advice is for you to appear to have been in the same predicament before—even if you haven't. People are much less likely to panic if you say, "Don't worry, I've dealt with this kind of thing before." However, your key people should know that you expect suggestions and that their input is always appreciated. I urge you to always be prepared so that you can deliver not only what is expected of you but consistently more—exceed expectations.

To sum up this talk today, I have to say that more than anything, professionalism is a state of mind. Thank you.

(Note: In response to several requests, I chose to use my notes to recreate this speech in its entirety, as closely as possible—DMG.)