

Quit, Die or Fired—The Problems Are Not Yours

This article is for stressed-out superintendents but it's not about you. If you work a 40-hour week, delegate without micromanaging and don't leave your wife and kids at 9:00 P.M. to babysit the pump station, forget it. You won't be interested in this article. Please go back to the family dinner table and stop reading now.

Are they still here? No? Marvelous! I thought those "abnormal" type of superintendents would never stop reading this biased writ. Can you believe their audacity to believe you can provide a great product and still attend your daughter's 1:00 P.M. ballet performance on a hot summer afternoon?

Now, for the rest of you anxiously awaiting what will be said next:

I'm privileged to have the opportunity to work with many golf courses annually in California and Mexico. I witness a lot of superintendents stressing over the demands of the job and long days. 60-70 hour work weeks are not uncommon and taking frustration home from the course is expected. Do you go to sleep pondering which employees may not show up the next morning? Do you agonize over the weather, turf disease, over-seeding, aerifying, drainage, soil fertility, equipment, budgets and so much more? You superintendents are geniuses and darned good at what you do. You are persistent and determined to provide the best product possible to golfers. Hey! I get it. It's in your nature as a superintendent. I used to be one. Not for long—only 10 years, but I had the privilege of having been fired from a superintendent job that I loved. A job I put my heart and time into. I say privileged because it taught me very early in my developing career that all of the agronomic, equipment, staff, and irrigation challenges remained as the owners' concern long after I was gone.

The stress festers inside as an internal battle. It pits work against family time. Sure, you've read it before in the President's message, "It's a rough summer, appreciate your family and take off early." No offense Mr. President(s), but the bold statement that needs to be posed is the one that I've told to young and old superintendents alike:

"You can quit tomorrow, you may die, or you could be fired. But all the problems are still theirs. Everything you took home and worried about remains with the golf course."

This does not mean that you are indifferent and callous about the golf course. It simply means don't forget that you are the caretaker and not the owner. Ever ask yourself who appreciates your time more? Your family or your membership/owner? The answer seems obvious and easy as you say "my family." No doubt they will appreciate your time more than the stressed out turf and the golfers complaining about their day as they drink a cold one on the 19th hole. The problem is, you see, the dilemma from within; and it's

tough. You are in the middle of the forest and can't see the end; nor can you identify the time that you entered the forest. You are in a puzzling challenge- a mystery. A veritable riddle is where you have placed yourself. All this for the sake of your golf course. You have taken the job to heart and come to believe that this land is your land.

Recently I got a message from a superintendent friend that he and the General Manager had just been terminated for economic reasons. He asked me why he had put in so many hours and taken so much to heart on a piece of property that he did not own. I shared with him the fact that I was practically singing and dancing as I drove to the unemployment office the day after I got fired. Million dollar floods, a malfunctioning pump intake, poa infestation, all were my responsibility & concern. Those problems were not mine though. I did not own the property. Simply put, the things we choose to worry about are up to us. In a peculiar way my friend was at peace with a decision that he did not control but one which now controls his future. He will be a better superintendent at his next golf course. More importantly, he will be a better family man and healthier internally. Despite the same challenges, he may decide to take off a couple hours on a Monday to read a book to his daughter's class.

Recently on a jobsite, the superintendent disappeared for a couple of hours as my partner and I went about our business performing a water audit. We noticed his truck was missing from its usual place. His stress level redlined out earlier after learning about some budget issues. Later, as he drove his golf car up to us, we noticed a devilish little grin on his face. When asked about the grin, he confided in us that he was frustrated with the surprise budget requirements management was asking for and it required numerous hours of additional paperwork. "Did you get it done?" I asked. He smiled as he replied; "No mate, I went surfing and cleared my mind. Every Superintendent needs a way to release the pressure." He had taken up surfing months earlier. During the middle of the day or after work on his way home he would stop and surf. He discovered it helped him deal with the stress. Everybody should develop an outlet for themselves. If surfing is not an option for you, do something simple. When I was stressed as a superintendent, my assistant and I would go to the cliff edge overlooking the Pacific Ocean. We would throw rocks into an old steel drum that sat down below the cliff. Try a new sport or hobby. Choose one that allows you to clear your mind and leave the job behind, if only for a few minutes.

We all know the economy is tough and you certainly don't want to lose your job in times like this. I've never heard of a superintendent that lost their job because they put in 50 hours a week and not 65. Keep your perspective and never forget that unless your name is on the title, it's not your property.

Find your outlet and enjoy the waves on the ocean of life.

Craig is a partner in Zellers-Plageman "Just add water" LLC. They are irrigation consultants who specialize in providing "turn-key" irrigation control system retrofits, GPS/AsBuilts, water audits, conservation programs, system design and central programming. Craig was formerly a CGCS Superintendent for 10 years and has been in the golf industry for 32 years. He is not afraid to admit that being fired was the best career-changing move that he never made.