MAKING THE EXPERIENCED OPERATORS OF TOMORROW

By Scott Beachy

Think about your starting day at your first job in this industry. You did not have any experience and never used any of what seemed like large equipment, whatever it was, dedicated mowers, sprayers, and tractors with different attachments or even loaders, backhoes or dump trucks. You were either one of two types: scared and unsure of yourself as far as running equipment or you were over confident and thought, “where are the keys?”

Now, jump ahead to today. Every year seems to bring one or two new employees to our department and at least half have no experience, yet they are still unsure and over confident. So, how do you train them? First, I would check with your insurance company. Sometimes they will have training available that is at least partially relevant (usually the safety aspect) to the equipment you use. If not, ask them for any recommendations.

At our department, we do a blended program. We have employees attend classes and in-house training. Also, do not forget about continuous training. We try to send employees to some of these classes every one to three years to keep them safe and current. A lot of factors come into play when it comes to deciding when a person is ready to run a piece of equipment. It may be a time factor or if you have one, it may be a union issue. Once all the other issues involved have been satisfied, is it important to point out that you have to feel comfortable with an employee using a piece of equipment. I try to get through these issues to get at least one training session done as early as possible. I find that once a person starts to learn the controls and operation of a piece of equipment while watching other operators they will be able to learn a lot faster. They will ask themselves, “How is that done?” and pay close attention to that particular operation. They will pick-up on things that they would not have without that first training.

The first thing I say to a new trainee is, “This is the most important thing I am going to tell you.” Then, I say slowly and clearly, “TAKE YOUR TIME.” That also means when you train someone make sure you have plenty of time and are not in a rush.

You want to give this person a sense that he/she has all day. I start by explaining the controls and what they do. I also strongly encourage them to ask questions. When I am done explaining something I ask them if they understand and have them repeat back to me the functions of those particular controls. I give them an open area where they cannot do any damage or hurt anyone. I have them perform one function at a time and if I seem them doing something wrong I will stop them right away to prevent them from forming any bad habits. If it is a complex piece of equipment I may only teach them a portion of the equipment’s operation. Once they are comfortable with that, I will teach them the remaining portion.

We never put a maximum on the number of training sessions. We always want to do a minimum, but are willing to do more. Even if I think they are ready I will want them to feel comfortable and vice versa. Again, I do not want them to feel rushed in any way because being rushed is how accidents happen.

Finally, when they start using the equipment on their own, do not give them jobs that precision or speed are necessary. That is what your experienced operators are for. Let them get enough time under their belt before expecting these things out of them. After all, experience is the best teacher.

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PLANNING NEXT YEAR’S BUDGET—Do You Know Your Costs?

By Don Savard, CSEM, CGM

It’s that time of year again and sports field and grounds managers are planning the Operating Budget for the next fiscal year. Unlike a Capital Budget which is for the purchase of major pieces of equipment, or a Program Budget which is for special projects such as a major field renovation or construction, an Operating Budget is a financial plan for managing the day-to-day operations of a sports field or grounds maintenance operation. We are talking about things like grass seed, mowing and marking paint. Whether you have been given a dollar amount to work with or are starting from zero and must justify every expense, your must mission is to learn what your costs and estimate what you expect to spend. If you don’t know where to begin, here are some tips to help you get started.

Track your historical data. Collect receipts, and all records pertaining to your facilities grounds or sports field operations for the last fiscal year. A ledger book or a computer spreadsheet program will be very helpful for organizing this data.

Find out what is expected. You must know exactly what the site will be used for. For example, is it an open space used for a variety of activities, or will it be used for a single purpose such as exhibition baseball games? What are the expectations of the owner? Will certain rules or conditions apply such as the amount and severity of use, use during inclement weather? Different sites will have different budgets based on their maintenance levels. Find out the expectation of the owner first. Without the support of the owner, it will likely waste your time to budgeting for a higher level than what your owner envisions. Consider the following differences in maintenance levels.

Maintenance Levels:

Level 1 Showpiece facility (professional sports facility)

Level 2 Comprehensive stewardship (College facility or high end sports facility)

Level 3 Managed care (well maintained high school or park)

Level 4 Reactive management (minimal care, mowing, no irrigation, occasional fertilizer)

Level 5 Crisis response (neglected, occasional mowing)

Inventory the site. Take measurements of the area, identify weed and pest pressures and grass types and have a complete chemical and physical soil test performed. This information is necessary for designing a turf maintenance program. Perform an irrigation audit to quantify the effectiveness of the irrigation system and the drainage of the soil. Evaluate the effectiveness of the current maintenance system. Determine the thresholds for acceptable wear damage, weeds or pest pressures that you will tolerate before corrective measures will be taken? Think about what can go wrong and how you would respond.

Conduct an inventory of your resources. Who will do the work? What equipment, materials, and time will be needed to get the work done? You will also need to find out how much money was spent in the past and whether it was adequate to meet expectations.

Make a list of all the activities in your program. For each activity list:

1. The frequency of each activity
2. Number of people and the man-hours required and the cost
3. Time constraints
4. The equipment needed and cost
5. Materials needed and the cost

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