

# The Politics of Sports Field Management

By Don Savard, CSFM, CGM

I am a sports field manager at a high school in Wilmington, Delaware. I have been managing high school sports fields for the past 21 years. I have come to the following conclusion, that is, managing a sports field is easy, but people make it complicated. How great would it be if we could go to work every day and grow the very best sports fields without anyone bothering us? Like it or not, we need people so that we can do what we do. We serve with a variety of people from our co-workers to the people who use the fields, to the people who own the fields and pay the bills. If we consider these people as our customers, are we not customer service specialists first and field managers second?

Many of us and our crews are support staff. We work for organizations whose primary business is something other than grass and dirt. Something like education, or government. From a financial point of view our operation is viewed as overhead.

We compete with other departments within our organization for money, resources, positions, recognition, programs, and approvals. Nothing comes easy. To survive and for peace of mind, we need to get along with our customers. Our stakeholders or customers have diverse interests and agendas. Some of these agendas serve the common good; some serve someone's individual self interest. To fully understand the politics of the organization, you must become well acquainted with all of the stakeholders and their agendas. And within each organization, some stakeholder's agendas have more legitimacy than others, including yours and mine.

Let's look at our stakeholders or customers both within and external to our organization:

- First and foremost are the athletes who use and play on our fields. That is why we are here. We try to maintain safe and playable fields for them. The players want fields that play well and do not impede their performance. Players, particularly at the youth level take the athletic facilities for granted. Usually if they do not seem to notice the field, we are doing an adequate job. At many levels, the players seem to be the easiest customers to satisfy.
- Coaches exist to develop their players and guide the teams to victories. At times the coaches seem to be at odds with the sports field managers, considering the ways their practices and drills use or abuse their fields. Coaches will also let you know when they think there is something wrong with your field.
- Athletic Directors are responsible for the management and quality of their athletic programs. That includes everything from hiring coaches, arranging team schedules, renting buses and letting someone know that a shower head in

the locker room is leaking. Athletic Directors have a very large sphere of influence.

They also hear everything from everybody. An Athletic Director on your side is an important ally.

- Then there are the owners. They are the people who give you money. Or withhold it. The owner of the facility can be a Board of Education, a School Administration or a Board of Trustees, a government department or some other entity. Frequently this entity has a hierarchy of management in which you have a boss and your boss has a boss and so on. In organizations, the chain of command is important and must be respected. Breaking the chain of command in organizations probably won't get you a court martial, but it may cause you some pain in a variety of ways depending on the organization and the personalities involved. Respect the food chain.
- There are usually support people within this hierarchy. These include administrative assistants, accounting specialists, and others who are the wheels of the organization. Be careful you don't get caught under the wheels.
- Parents of players- Alaska Governor Sarah Palin expressed it perfectly in her Republican vice Presidential nominee acceptance speech- "What is the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? ... Lipstick!" 'Nuff said. Parents can be tough critics but they can also be staunch supporters. How they are treated usually makes the difference.
- The committees who run youth league sports- very dangerous territory. If you fall in that quick sand you might not be saved. Watch where you tread!
- The public and the press have a perception of you or your field that can be accurate or inaccurate. Like it or not, these external customers can influence your internal customers.
- Vendors, suppliers and contractors can help make you look good or let you wither on the vine. So can your coworkers and other sports field managers. Treat your network right.
- Family, and close friends because we need their love and support; without them life is a lonely place.
- And Nature, we are its stewards. We can never be successful if we work against it.

As customer service representatives, we're the "go to" guys and gals when it comes to our sports field facilities. Stakeholders at all levels come to us when they need something from us or want

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something done. From being the “tenth man” on the baseball team to the event coordinator for a non-sporting event, we are the hub of the wheel. It’s great when our customers are happy and it’s miserable when they’re not.

Remember that a problem is the difference between what somebody has and what they want. Our job is to solve problems; big and small. Unfortunately we face challenges such as resources, time, weather and the unexpected. Even when we do everything right or at least the best we can, somebody can be dissatisfied, usually over the small problems. They complain. We get defensive. Things escalate. We feel like we get no respect. They feel that we are not listening to them. Frustration sets in and breeds distrust. There is less cooperation. Communication stops, our effectiveness shrinks and nobody is happy. Sound familiar?

*When discord strikes, both sides own the problem. Let’s look at the part we own.*

When Sports Field Managers and their customers have disagreements resulting in communication breakdown, there are no winners. Let’s look further into the dynamics of Human Relations.

Good Human Relations skills begin with Respect. The American psychologist Abraham Maslow described human self esteem needs — the need for respect from others and the need for self-respect. Without the fulfillment of these needs, Maslow

suggests, an individual feels discouraged, weak and inferior. Self respect begins with honest self knowledge and self awareness. Respect from others often entails recognition, acceptance, and appreciation. Respect from others must be earned. Self respect, on the other hand, is an inside job.

Self respect begins with self care. Good self care results in good self control. Occasionally, we all find ourselves hungry, angry, lonely or tired. When we feel any of those ways, we are emotionally vulnerable and our self control can be compromised. It is good to take care of ourselves. If our needs are neglected, we are not at our best. And if we are not taking care of our interests, how can we take care of others?

Respect for others is based on self-respect and follows the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” It is the value that makes the world a more decent and civilized place.

But this is where it starts to get sticky. The world is not always a more decent and civilized place. Things happen. People disagree. Conflicts occur.

Have you ever had this happen to you? You are in the middle of preparing your field for an event. A team comes out and starts using your field while you are working on it. You approach the coach and explain what you are doing. In spite of what you say, not only does the team stay, but they damage the field as well.

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The natural reaction to this type of conflict is ANGER and the anger could take the form of:

- Retaliation
- Us against them
- Negativity
- Poor Attitude
- Defensiveness
- Distrust
- Passive aggressive behavior
- Despair

These feelings are none other than good old fashioned Self Righteous Anger. If you look at this anger closely you might find that it is driven by good old fashioned self centered fear.

Self centered fears include:

- Being made look foolish or be embarrassed.
- Being made to something that you don't want to do.
- Being afraid that it will cost you something.
- Being afraid that you will lose something.
- Being afraid others will be mad at you.
- Being afraid that you will lose your personal power or control.
- Being afraid that you are not enough.

The more you think about it the angrier you could become. You could take it out on somebody, the coach, or a coworker or family member. Or, you might internalize your feelings only to have them come out another way. Have you ever indulged in a supersized portion of self pity or plotted how to get even? These behaviors waste a great deal of personal time and energy.

Ask yourself what could have done first to have avoided the situation? Did you do your part first by:

- Checking a schedule to see if anybody else had a legitimate right to the field?
- Communicate properly to the stakeholders your plan to be on the field?
- Properly request that they stay off the field?

The issue is not what the coach or the team did; the issue is how you handled it and how you will handle it next time. Remember, being the victim is tiresome.

*Don Savard is a Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM) and Certified Grounds Manager (CGM); Director, Athletic Facilities and Grounds, Salesianum School; and a member of the SFMANJ Board of Directors.*



## Dr. Henry W. Indyk Graduate Fellowship in Turfgrass Science

*As many of you know, the turfgrass industry lost a dear friend and colleague in September 2005. We will all miss Henry very much and would like to insure that his legacy lives on. The Indyk family would like to establish a memorial fellowship to support graduate students interested in applied turfgrass science. This fellowship is being created to help assure that tomorrow's graduate students have the financial resources to get an advanced degree in turfgrass science at Rutgers University. To fund a full graduate assistantship each year in Henry's name, we will need to raise a total of \$400,000. Your generous support at this time will bring us closer to reaching this goal.*

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