

Duncan McGilvray has long preached the need for better communications. Here, he outlines the new approach he is taking at Potters Bar GC.

It's good to talk

Communication here we go again - pushing the boundaries further - or even taking chances. It may stir up excitement in the confident but probably concerns and worries in the not so confident.

Having covered communication some time ago in at least two different articles I was asked last year to do an update on the importance of this subject.

I had to be honest and say that I had not done anything any differently than I did back then (some 10 years ago) and had nothing new to offer in spite of taking up a new post at Potters Bar.

Well that was last year and how wrong I was in thinking that you could do all the things you've done before and succeed!

At the beginning here at Potters Bar the newsheet articles went down well, the photographs on the notice board were favourably commented on and one of our lady members (following my first presentation to the Ladies Section) suggested I was too young to manage a golf course! It may have been an insult - But I am taking it as a compliment!

Everything was progressing well until I was confronted by questions of the most obvious kind.

**How often are the greens cut?
Why don't you cut the greens shorter?
Why are you making holes in the greens?**

These questions made me seriously doubt my so called abilities in the communication area. All this information is of course available but nobody wanted to look for it.

Never a man to give up easily, we arranged for an info night first with the Board of Directors (to put their mind to ease about what I was going to say) and thereafter with the general membership.

The Board info night was excellent. Everyone (including me!) learned a lot. The first member information night however was not well supported. In fact staff and board members made up around 50% of the total!

The reason?

Because everything on the golf course was perfect no one wanted to complain?

Of course not.

The timing of the meeting (early

evening weekday) and a touch of general apathy was probably the reason. So what do we do ignore the situation? Not a good idea as I firmly believe through painful experience that if we do not communicate effectively (even to people who do not make the effort to listen). We will not succeed.

We therefore tried again with little more success than before (still early evening but a different weekday) so it was heads down to think of something a bit more radical. Through discussion it was commented on that most of the queries, or more accurately complaints were expressed following competitions and the vast majority of those are played at the weekend.

When you really analyse it why would anyone make the effort to come to the Club in the evening specifically to listen to me droning on about the golf course? In my experience the only way members will make a serious commitment to attend a golf course presentation is if there is a crisis situation, which requires urgent action, and people want to make their feelings known.

We have our problems - but we could not describe any of our problems as a crisis!

Along the lines of the "Mohammed and the mountain theory" it was suggested that I do a presentation during the day following a competition at the weekend. A good idea on the face of it but maybe not practical. I don't know what you're like after a game of golf but all I want to do is have a shower, a drink and a light hearted chat. I don't want to sit down and get a lecture about the finer points of golf course greenkeeping (and I'm a greenkeeper!)

So what was the answer?

One of the Board members suggested a more one to one situation where I was available at advertised times at weekends. A bit like an MP's Saturday morning surgery or clinic. I was a bit apprehensive at first but decided to give it a go - no choice really!

I have now done six (one Saturday and one Sunday each month linked to monthly medals/competitions and the occasional mixed match).

The format?

Signs at the entrance to the club (from the course).

Duncan is available for any golf course queries - you'll find him in the Room from 11am to 3pm.

I therefore station myself for at least a couple of hours in an appropriate room with:

1. Photographs of the course both past and present.
2. An A4 sheet listing all areas of the course to prompt queries even though I have found that few members require any prompting!
3. Anything else which may be relevant.
4. Simply answer questions.

For the last hour or so I have found it helpful to become a little less formal.

Drink at the bar (non-alcoholic - keep your wits about you!) - sandwich or meal in the restaurant - just being available really.

From the initial feeling of apprehension/waste of time I now feel it has become an extremely important area of direct communication and deserves the effort. There are no queues to speak to me - I'm not that popular! But I do get on average around 6 members with varying queries on each occasion.

If you do two days per month over 10 months with six members at each - that's 120 people a year! 120 member's discussions on a one to one basis in a year I believe is a very effective and worthwhile communication exercise. The added bonus of course is that whenever any previously related discussion on course matters is brought up in general play on the course there is a greater degree of knowledge on which to base comments.

A good tip is to keep brief records of subject matter - it focuses our attention on topical issues and is a good indicator of what to produce in future reports and newsletters/articles.

I recently read Sandy McDivot's article in the August issue 'Friendly Advice' and it certainly struck a chord which I had not really thought about before. The general message throughout the article was "make friends not enemies and you are likely to succeed in what you do." It reminded me of a conversation, which I had recently with a pretty good single figure golfing member.

Member: "Duncan there is an area to the left of the 5th hole (stroke 2) which has a large heap of seemingly abandoned cut branches, bushes and debris - a number of my drives have ended up in there never to be seen again - can you remove them asap."

Duncan: "We are of course aware of this, as all the cuttings from winter tree maintenance are there (the most out of the way area possible) for supervised burning at the right time of year. Unfortunately burning did not take place this year, as it was not safe to do so. It will therefore have to wait until the coming winter - there is simply no other area available."

Member: "But what am I going to do in the meantime? Lose more golf balls and therefore not win competitions or matches?"

Duncan: "As the area is some 50 yards off line it would probably be better if you spoke to Gary (our Professional) rather than me!" (Tongue stuck firmly in cheek and smiling!) - He found it quite amusing.

It would not have been possible to get this message across in the way it was intended unless I had been available on various occasions to discuss course matters both seriously and jokingly in the past.

Because of the strides being made in training within our profession in the areas of presentation and communication, conversations like the one I have just described should not be that difficult. We do, however, have to be extremely careful in gauging moods so that the right comment may be made at the right time.

Putting our big foot in it can set us back severely in what we are trying to achieve. It is however I believe essential for us to take the initiative and move forward even if we do make some mistakes.

All the other areas of communication are still carried out but this clinic surgery idea is certainly helping us "get the message across, and is certainly well worth the effort."

Duncan McGilvray, Course Manager, Potters Bar Golf Club