

Golf clubs and in particular, the golf course maintenance, is a varied and complicated place, while greenkeeping is a complex occupation, and many of the operations can be unpopular and misunderstood. In the first of a new series, Paul Lowe helps to bridge the gap between member and greenkeeper...



## New Beginning: Communication and Managing Difficult Members

**The golfing member will always have high expectations, placing ever-increasing pressure on the greenkeeper and committee member. During the year we conduct certain operations. Aeration, sand dressing, and removing trees, are just some of the contentious issues we do. So why do we do it?**

**Over a series of articles we will explain the 'Whys and Wherefores' of our operations. We will explain**

**the benefits and hopefully a greater understanding and appreciation of our work will arise.**

So it's early in the New Year, many of us are trying to lose those extra pounds that we have gained during the festivities. We make New Year resolutions and a new beginning is ahead. Many of our golf club members are voting on new Committee Members, the New Captain is announced and the committee are looking forward to the new challenge with trepidation.

It's true to say that today's committee member requires skin like a rhinoceros. You need the communication skills and the diplomacy of the very best mediator.

We are all prone to the odd adverse comment or difficult request. Whether that's the usual 'Cut the greens lower', 'Cut the rough lower', 'Stop putting holes in our lovely greens' and, even, 'Why can't we look like Augusta?'

Greenkeeping is complex and to expect members to comprehend the complexities of greenkeeping

is unfair. They have gardens and watch The Masters at home. This creates, the osmo-greenkeeper, everyone's an expert. Expectations are unrealistic and demands are ever increasing.

So how do we handle the difficult member, the member who is irrational and unreasonable, the member who is vocal about his grievance and will share his opinion to all and sundry?

We can communicate as much as possible, but what if this person does not want to listen? As we all know, for communication to work our message must be heard.

Do we just ignore them? Well, the problem with this is that negativity breeds negativity!

It's no coincidence that groups of difficult members form. They tend to play together and have a few pints in the clubhouse together expressing their views together. I call this the 'Pull up a chair mentality'.

The Human is a pack animal; we prefer groups and we crave acceptance in that group.

One of the easiest ways to become accepted is to agree with the negative views of others. Thus group mindsets forms.

In any business there is the 80/20 rule, this also applies to customer satisfaction. 80% of our customers are normally happy and content, but 20% are not. This 20% are, on average, misinformed or have a lack of understanding.

With good communication techniques we should be able eradicate most complaints and concerns... However there is a hidden 5%.

This 5% are never happy; in fact, they are only happy when they are complaining. It doesn't matter what you say or do they will find something to complain about. It's not personal its just the way they are.

Why should we make them unhappy by giving them nothing to complain about?

Pleasing this minority is impossible and trying to please the unappeasable will ultimately have a detrimental affect on the course and the work your greenkeeper needs to do in order to maintain the course.

The skill is determining who is a compulsive moaner and who has a genuine complaint.

If we get this wrong then you could be wasting your time - time that ought to be best spent on more important matters.

Don't let them get to you - Stay out of it emotionally and concentrate on listening non-defensively and actively.

A person may make disparaging or irrational comments- don't rise to the bait. If necessary stop the conversation. Your happiness and health is more important than your point of view.

Or simply remind them that they are a member of a golf club and as such should act accordingly. You welcome constructive comments but will not tolerate projected insults.

Listen - listen - listen! Look and sound like you're listening. The member cares about the course; he wants to know that you care and that you're interested in their problem. Even if you're not!

If you are genuinely interested use empathy but only if it is genu-

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ine. “I can understand that your saying” or “I see what you mean”. Again, these responses need to be genuine.

Build rapport - Sometimes it's useful to add another phrase to the empathy response, including yourself in the picture. - “I can understand how you feel, I don't like it either but we are on a long road of improvements, or we are on the case”.

This has the effect of getting on the members side and builds rapport. It shows that you and your greenkeeping team care, you're aware of the problem and a solution is underway.

If they have a complaint and it's genuine, then continue empathizing and tell the members what you'll do about the situation. Thank them for bringing this to your attention and make sure the situation is fixed as soon as possible.

Stupid people & comments- the fact is you can't argue with stupidity, more importantly you should never argue.

### Angry People

Angry people are usually power struggling, or they may be intimidators/ bullies, people who use anger to throw others off guard. Angry people are usually rewarded for their behaviour by people who'd do anything to avoid confrontation.

You probably can't deflate their anger but you can stop taking it

personally. And remember that angry people generally have self-esteem issues that underlie their hostility.

When faced with anger, simply stop the conversation and tell them to get in touch when they have calmed down. When calm, we can then have a rational & hopefully constructive conversation.

### Compulsive Complainers

Complainers that will never be happy, unless of course they are complaining. Again these people have self-esteem issues.

Stop letting complainers get away with it. In the case of a complaining member, you can turn the com-

plaint around by saying, “What do you think the answer is?” then ask them a question to their solution before you know it, complainers will be solving their own problems and agreeing with you.

Committee role- It's simply wrong for members of a golf club to approach employees and pass negative comments or judgment to the staff, no matter how frivolous.

This sort of conduct is non productive - it not only encourages communication breakdown, lowers morale and poor relations with the members, it is also stopping the staff from working.

Ultimately the members pay the wages, but no more so than any shareholder of any organisation. Like any business, channelled communication procedures need to be in place to eradicate this sort of culture.

In some cases this is tantamount to bullying. All clubs have a responsibility to protect the staff and have a duty of care. Bullying problems is the responsibility of the employer not the employee.

To summarise, difficult people are a fact of golf course life.

Communicate with openness, produce clear facts, policies and procedures.

Make decisions as a team and the integral part of the team must be the experts you employ.

Protect those employees and never ever make someone a scapegoat.



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