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The longer I am in this business, the more I realize that there are very few black-and-white issues. By this, I mean that there are valid and conflicting viewpoints on almost any subject related to golf course management.

For instance, locally and nationally, superintendents' associations are frequently asked to take a strong stand on management companies. The requests come from individuals who have had negative experiences with one or more of the companies or are currently feeling threatened by them. Valid reasons exist for being critical of management companies. We all know several people in the business who have been treated unfairly or unethically by one. However, it would be unfair to categorize all management companies as bad. I know of instances when a management company actually improved a superintendent's position by recognizing the deficiencies that he had been forced to deal with and making changes in the operation of the facility to assist the superintendent in improving conditions.

I have also talked to several superintendents working for management companies who felt confident that they would not be held responsible for less-than-ideal golf course conditions when those conditions were caused by factors outside of their influence. They feel that the experience of the principal players in their management companies prepares them to understand the difficulties encountered by superintendents, in that the principals can objectively assess a given operation and discern between what may be an unfortunate set of circumstances and incompetence.

Some superintendents also believe that management companies allow them opportunities that they would not find in other segments of the business. The opportunity to move up the management ladder to a regional or national supervisory position appeals to them.

Unfortunately, though, the prevailing sentiment among superintendents who have management company experience is negative. Lower wages are commonplace. This traces back to the reason that management companies exist: to enhance their bottom lines. As much as they talk about commitment to quality, many management companies will only deliver as good of a product as they can get away with and still turn a generous profit. This creates a frustrating situation for golf course superintendents who have been trained to deliver the best conditions they can. It also affects the individual golf course superintendent's future: a superintendent might not be seriously considered for a better position at another club because the golf course he currently manages has a reputation as being only mediocre in quality and he has no power to affect positive change there.

Another complaint is that promises of opportunity to move up the management ladder are rarely fulfilled. It seems that companies frequently give upper-level management positions to clubhouse managers or golf professionals because of the prevailing mindset that these individuals manage the companies' "profit centers," while the superintendents manage debit centers. In fact, we know that we manage the true profit center of our facilities. If you do not agree with that, then drive past a golf course when it is 40 degrees, raining and windy and count the number of cars in the parking lot. Time and again, golfer surveys have indicated that there are plenty of places to buy a hamburger or golf shirt, but only one place to play their favorite golf course. Golfers have also proven that they will travel considerable distances and pay top dollar to play a well-maintained golf course.

I am practical enough to know that management companies are here to stay. They do fill a need in many situations. In fact, I believe they will run in cycles and continue to grow in influence before we see a leveling off and eventually a decline in them due to competition and diminished profit margins. I do not think that they will ever take over the majority of facilities, particularly private ones, because they cannot deliver the same level of quality at a reasonable price that clubs with active, interested members or oversight committees can do for themselves.