



“Houston... We Have a Problem . . .”

A new phenomenon has entered our world which, judging from the many MAGCS Web site messages, is now AN ISSUE. If you are experiencing this problem, you are probably not reading this column because you are A) weed-eating, B) spraying something, C) mowing out-of-control grass, D) training a new employee (if you're lucky), or E) all of the above. The phenomenon to which I refer is known to the scientific community as Laboris kaputicus, or NO LABOR to the layman, and it's starting to bug me. I've fielded countless (okay, maybe five) calls from my friends in the business regarding laborers—Do you have any? Can you find me some? Where are they going?—and I regretfully have no answer. This has never been an issue for me, especially in my particular geographical area. Labor has always been plentiful in Aurora, and the “lose someone today, replace them tomorrow” mentality was always the rule. This underappreciated, readily available labor pool has suddenly dried up, as it has for most superintendents, and it is throwing a huge monkey wrench into the once well-oiled machine known as “the crew.” Where have all the flower planters gone? The answer is simple—they've found higher-paying work.

Can we pare down our staff, retaining fewer workers at higher pay rates, and not compromise on the quality of our golf courses? Or must we go to our powers-that-be and request more funds to hire the labor we need to maintain our properties?

Our economy is doing very well, and unemployment is down to near-record lows. People are working, and being paid well for it. Workplaces previously known for poor wages and working conditions are changing their ways and enticing the labor force to shop around for jobs with good pay and benefits. These workplaces typically employ hundreds of laborers, which enables them to offer benefits that can not be touched by a small enterprise such as a golf course. Granted, it may be third shift (they're all going three shifts in a booming economy), but it is third shift at 10, 12, even 15 dollars per hour. Can we compete with that? Can we pare down our staff, retaining fewer workers at higher pay rates, and not compromise on the quality of our golf courses? Or must we go to our powers-that-be and request more funds to hire the labor we need to maintain our properties?

I pose these questions with no answer to offer. The reality of the situation is that money and benefits talk, and failure to offer them leads people to walk. Never has there been a greater need for communication with our owners/boards/municipalities about this issue. If kept uninformed, any decrease in course quality could be misinterpreted as a failure on the superintendent's part. I hate to use an overused word, but the onus is upon us to be PROACTIVE—to professionally explain the situation, and offer possible solutions (i.e., raising the pay scale, improving benefits, etc.). Even seemingly insignificant perks such as uniform

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laundering can go a long way to keep employees happy and appreciated. Ours being a seasonal business makes this all the more difficult. We are offering eight months' hard work at comparatively low pay. The reward for a successful employee is the possibility of returning the following season for a quarter more an hour. This is NOT an overly attractive means of retaining people.

All industries go through labor issues. Most all have learned to adapt to the changing demands of the workforce. The time is upon us to follow suit. If we wish to retain good employees whom we've taken the time to train and assist through the "rocky" times, we must get the word out that we, too, need to adapt. We need prospective employees to feel that ours is a business that has its rewards and offers a sense of self-worth. We've done so incredibly well at dealing with the countless other issues our industry has faced over the years, and it is now time to deal with this one. *Laboris kaputicus* is as out of control as our uncut roughs, and we can stop it with a little diplomacy and ingenuity.




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