

# A Few Keys to Longevity

*Editor's Note: This "Voice of Experience" comes from Monroe Miller, a veteran superintendent of the Wisconsin GCSA and editor of its award-winning magazine, The Grass Roots. The article originally appeared in that publication's May/June 2004 issue.*

*Joe Kunze, president of the Badger Turf and Grounds Club, invited me to campus on a spring evening to talk to the members of the club at their monthly meeting. I am always glad for such an invitation, maybe subconsciously pleased that someone is interested in what I might have to say.*

Which, obviously, is the first dilemma—what to talk about. Since Joe didn't give me much lead time, I decided the easiest topic to prepare for would be to share with them a few of the things I have learned on the golf course over my 30-plus-year career.

There are entire sections in bookstores dedicated to this general subject matter. Many of them are full of clichés and tend to the very trite. And I could be assured that a group of college-age men didn't want to hear the likes of "It's easier said than done," or "A fool and his money are soon parted," or "Water always runs downhill."

But you have to learn something when you are on the job as long as I have been, and mostly it is good advice, albeit obvious in some cases.

Missing from the list will be the obvious—agronomic advice. My starting point in this is that if you are a golf course superintendent, you had better have plant and soil issues in hand. For most of us, solving cultural problems is the most fun part of the profession.


Anyway, here's the advice I gave that class of future golf course superintendents, in no particular order.

1. Use common sense. It seems so simple, but too often people overthink problems. When you have a farm background like I do, learning common sense was part of growing up.
2. Work hard, all the time and every day at the golf course. Players/employers will notice and respect you for it.
3. As a complement to working hard is working smart. This sounds like a cliché, but it isn't. You can work hard at planting a tree, for example, but if it is in the wrong place you'll get to do it twice.


4. Do what you are told to do when you are told to do it. Don't be offended; remember, everyone has a boss.
5. Be honest to the extreme with everyone you deal with—employers, your employees, the DNR, colleagues, everyone. I once witnessed a golf course superintendent's attempt to blow smoke in the green committee chairman's ear. It didn't work and was a big mistake. Honesty pays big dividends.
6. Set high standards and goals. Overreach. Strive for excellence. If you don't at least aim high, you can be assured you won't get there.
7. Listen. Being a good listener is essential if you are going to turn out the kind of conditions expected of you. You must listen to complaints and criticisms, but it doesn't hurt to listen to compliments, either.
8. Do no harm. Sometimes doing nothing is better than doing something that could have a negative impact. The job is tough enough as it is without shooting yourself in the foot.
9. Function with enthusiasm. Nothing great was ever accomplished without it. And you will find it is contagious to those around you.
10. Practice neatness in everything—the shop, your equipment, your golf course. It sets a good example for staff, and if you are sloppy the chances are your staff will be too. Neatness presents a good first impression. Neatness can help carry you through tough periods due to weather or other conditions out of your control.
12. Look forward, not back. The great things you may have done last year or 10 years ago don't matter much. Today and tomorrow are what count.
13. Fix small problems before they become big ones. Procrastination is a terrible disease and it can really hurt you.
14. Although it goes without saying, it commonly isn't done: cultivate a good relationship with your colleagues at your course—golf pro and clubhouse manager. They see the customers first and last and can be a help to you. It may not always be easy, but it is the smart thing to do.
15. Realize early on in your career that learning never stops. Continuing education should be a top priority of yours until you retire. You have to always try to get better—it is more than just a matter of keeping up.
16. Support the land-grant institution in the state where you work, even if it isn't your alma mater. Science is the solution to many of the problems we face, and agricultural research mostly goes on at our land-grant colleges. You can still cheer for the football team fielded by the college you attended, but local problems are solved locally.
17. Give something back to your profession. Be an office-holder, serve on a committee, host a meeting, attend the phosphorus ban hearing, participate in some way. Don't always let the other person do it.
18. Don't ever forget this: your security depends on the turf product you turn out each day, NOT on

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- degrees, CGCS, awards, golf scores or anything else.
19. Communicate on all levels within your organization. This is not the same as socializing.
  20. Fiscal responsibility is paramount. Not many of us work where a budget doesn't matter. In fact, the superintendents I respect most are those turning out a quality golf course with a modest amount of money. They get the maximum of the money they have because they must.
  21. Be a good representative of your organization. Make them proud of you.
  22. Understand golf and its rules. This, of course, does not mean you have to play golf, just understand it. Many of us do not appreciate a busman's holiday and shouldn't have to suffer such because someone thinks we should.
  23. In all things and all matters at work—sincerity. It is easy to spot a disingenuous person.
  24. Do your part in helping train the next generation of golf course superintendents. Provide the practical and vocational training they need and the mentoring that can be so important. As Professor James R. Love always said, this is the best way to repay those who helped you along the way.

It took an invitation from some college guys to precipitate my thoughts about longevity. Maybe this list will be a catalyst for you to do the same. If so, let me know. We can share advice with others, demonstrating that to some extent golf course superintendents are all fair-way philosophers. 


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