



As a Superintendent, What is Your Next Career Step?

At a time when disposable income is on a downward slide, most of us have experienced the negative impact in our workplaces. In the public sector, the middle class golfer is watching the amount he spends on leisure. Perhaps he opts to save those dollars or use them to spend more time with family. Park districts and municipalities are looking to golf courses to cut expenses because of lower tax revenues. Private clubs are experiencing membership loss from individual and corporate members alike.

With all that being said, is it enough for you to simply be the Golf Course Superintendent? Should you be looking to help out with the management of the club as a whole? Or, if the opportunity arises, will your director or general manager come to you and ask you to step up? Many clubs are already operating successfully without a traditional general manager. Others are restructuring to eliminate upper level positions or merging departments in the interest of saving money. If that happens at your club, are you the one they're going to turn to? Is that a more viable career move than trying to move to a higher level club? I spoke with three superintendents who have taken on a larger role at their clubs.

Dave Radaj, CGCS, Green Acres Country Club

Like many superintendents who move up in the club's management structure, Dave had been at Green Acres for a number of years. The club was in the midst of putting in a new pool and in the planning phases of a clubhouse and golf course renovation. It was at this time, in meetings with engineers, that the club realized Dave's skills weren't limited to the course. While working out the landscaping, Dave noticed that the arrangement of the new pool didn't allow for it. As a result the club, Dave, and the engineers changed the plans, so they allowed members to walk around the pool and still include landscaping.

Shortly after the pool project was finished, the club was scheduled to undergo clubhouse and course renovations that would close the entire club for a year. It was then that Dave was asked to take over as GM and run both projects until they reopened. They would then hire a new GM. The projects were a great success, and the club was very pleased with the work that was done, enough so that they offered Dave the permanent position of General Manager. Some Superintendents may think of this as a dream offer. After all, the GM has a great job, right?

They make more money. Because they are the boss, they can come and go as they please. They get to sit in a big cushy chair in an air conditioned office – perfect.

Dave truly enjoyed many aspects of the "temporary" position, working with the clubhouse staff and the business side of club management, and seeing a new side of the club were things that Dave liked about the GM role. With all the new challenges and positive aspects of the position, there were a few negatives as well, and those were deal breakers. First was the Food and Beverage side. Green Acres is a high-end private club, and fine dining is an absolute necessity. That means knowing wine and food pairings, along with a plethora of other information that isn't part of a Superintendent's education. The other issue, which was of greater importance, was the time away from family. A club wants the GM to be around during dinner service, holidays, evenings on weekends, etc., and for Dave nothing was worth that sacrifice. As a result he thankfully declined the offer to remain as General Manager. The club was happy to have him as the Superintendent and hired a new GM with a strong Food and Beverage background, which worked out well for all involved.

Even though this wasn't an overall great experience, Dave says there were lessons to be learned:

- Be a team player. Just because the club bought a new oven instead of a fairway mower, don't take it personally. It's a full service club, and all areas need to fire at full efficiency in order to serve the members.
- Don't jump to criticism about how others operate their area of the club. They have to provide a service just as you do.
- Keep a working relationship with other managers, and don't be afraid to mention issues to them that may need attention.

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Ron Fox, CGCS/GM, Point O'Woods Golf and Country Club

Just around the lake in Benton Harbor, Michigan, Ron Fox has been Superintendent at Point O'Woods since January of 1999. In that time he has raised the level of conditioning to one of the best designs in the Midwest. Whereas at one time the course would shine for the Western Amateur, Ron made it his goal to provide those tournament conditions for the paying membership throughout the season, and has done so with great success. Even though Point O'Woods is a wonderful club, like many others, it's not immune to a poor economy. With a membership split of about 50% local and 50% Chicagoans, the club relies equally on resident and non-resident members. Unfortunately, the economy in Michigan has resulted in the loss of 55 members. This has caused a large void in annual dues. Like many other clubs, they have resorted to drastic measures to cut costs and still provide a high quality experience. This meant operating without a stand-alone general manager – enter Ron.

Being the senior member of management staff, as well as having earned the trust of the club, Ron was asked to become GM, as well as Superintendent, in February of 2008. Feeling a responsibility not only to himself and his assistants, but to the club as a whole, Ron took on the challenge after conferring with other crossover superintendents at the 2008 GIS. Besides being the senior member of the management team, Ron also credits his tight budget management for his success at the club. He only went over budget once, when catastrophic weather hit the course and dropped 250 trees.

When looking at the club as a whole, Ron believes that Superintendents are the most qualified candidates to take on a leadership role, because they are accountable for any and all mistakes on the golf course. He says that we are, across the board, the best run department of the club. The management of a larger part of the club probably comes more naturally to us. Ron feels that as superintendents we have a better understanding of what is most important to the club in critical financial times. As great as all the restaurants and grills are at private clubs people don't say, "I'm going to join Point'O Woods because the dining room is so great." It's about the golf course. Making sure it remains in peak condition will be a key to getting the club back on firm footing for the future.

At this point in his career, dual roles are just fine for Ron, but he is quick to say that he will not be striving to become a General Manager at another club. His love is the golf course. He is also hesitant to get too involved in the Club Managers Association. He is reluctant to forsake education or trade shows directed at Golf Course Superintendents. That's because we are such a science based industry, with new products and services continually becoming available.

Rob Foster, Director of Golf and Park Maintenance, Lake Bluff Park District

Rob Foster recently took a higher level position in the Lake Bluff Park District. He was promoted from Golf Course Superintendent to Director of Golf and Park Maintenance during a recent merging of the two departments. While he doesn't



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have to worry about the food and beverage or clubhouse operations as someone at a private club would, he says the stress level has certainly increased. His need to delegate has increased as well. For this he relies on the two managers who work under him, one of whom is his old Assistant (Noah Mach), who was promoted to Golf Greens Manager.

The new position comes with new responsibilities, including snow removal, a public beach, seven baseball diamonds, and other activities such as party set-up/clean-up. It also comes with two budgets that must be maintained independently of each other, because the parks are tax payer funded and the golf course isn't. Thus far, Rob has been able to squeeze the additional responsibility into a normal work week, with the exception of a few meetings in the evenings.

When I asked Rob why he thought he was asked to take over the position he had a few different ideas. Rob already had a good working relationship with the Executive Director. He thinks he was seen as a leader who wasn't afraid to propose new solutions for today's challenges. He also thinks the promotion came from a combination of hard work, good timing, and a positive vision for the park district.

At this point Rob is looking forward to the new challenges. To prepare himself, he's going to attend classes to learn more about baseball fields and park maintenance. He isn't too concerned about the transition, because there are so many similarities between parks maintenance and golf maintenance. He is glad that the opportunity came along and has some opinions on why we, as (Assistant) Superintendents, are

becoming the go-to-guys for positions like this. He thinks that we tend to be better problem solvers and tend to have a straight forward attitude toward management. He also feels that his diverse work experiences have helped him move up the ladder. Rob has worked for private clubs, public clubs, municipalities, and management corporations. His eight years working for management companies has given him a business approach that the park district appreciates and fits the current economic times to a tee.

Is becoming a manager or director at your club going to be your dream job? There's only one way to find out. But how you make yourself the guy that gets asked is the key. For Dave the GM role wasn't the right fit. He feels he is more valuable on the course. The club views him as even more valuable because of the time he spent as GM. Ron took the position because he is part of the fabric of the club. They trusted him because of his previous record; he has a desire to be integral to the club's recovery from the recession. For Rob (who I feel got the best promotion because he doesn't have all of the clubhouse responsibilities), this is an opportunity to learn some new things, which will help get him away from the everyday grind on the golf course. All three of these gentlemen were more to their company than just the guy who grows grass, and they have been rewarded for it. In today's economy, proving your worth is going to become more and more important. If you can help with more than the golf course, then your employer will take notice. **-OC**

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