

FEATURE

Ryan Dunbar, *Cress Creek Country Club*

Growth in the Transition Zone



Turf isn't the only thing to struggle in gray area.

One thing that originally drew me to pursuing a career in the turf grass industry was its approach to professional development. Our industry is one of the strongest examples of modern apprenticeship.

Medieval apprenticeships were ostensibly contracts where a teenager was made to trade cheap labor for room, board, and an education—living and working with their master. The turf industries' "apprentices" are assistants, and its "masters" are superintendents. Though we do not live with them in the literal sense, working side-by-side with veterans who hold the very positions we are striving to achieve has few other equivalents. Assistants are not contracted for years to aid their superintendents and must eventually deal with a dilemma many traditional apprentices never had to face: the Transition Zone.

The term Transition Zone, as it refers to turf, is the area of the continental United States where weather conditions permit neither cool-season nor warm-season turf to thrive

year-round. However, I am speaking of a professional Transition Zone: The span of time where an assistant is as prepared as they can be to assume their first superintendence, but have not done so and must continue to function as an assistant. Simply put, when your assistant-sized pants start to chafe your superintendent-sized rear. Growth in the Transition Zone can be precarious.

Progression into the Transition Zone is not a bad thing. To the contrary, it should be the goal for most assistants. Our aim should be our continued education and professional growth. We should learn all we can at our current position and move onto a next level position when we feel our apex has been reached. Unfortunately, the job market does not always adhere to our plans, especially when the next level

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*A few assistants and superintendents of MAGCS from past year's Dom Grotti Championship event.
(L to R) Thom Irvin and Dave Schlagetter; Matt Leinen and Jerry Dinelli.*



is superintendent. Now you are in the Transition Zone.

So why is the Transition Zone precarious? The root cause of the problem lies with our ego, though I do not use the term with the staunch negative connotation it has often garnered. Ego lets you know you are valuable, skilled, and becoming more so with each passing season. A healthy amount of ego leads to confidence, and confidence is the muscle we flex when it's time to do the heavy lifting of leadership. Superintendents must be strong leaders.

Ego can be a good thing. Yet, unchecked ego will lead you down the wrong path when your Transition Zone moment comes. Sometimes the part of you that knows you're ready can make peace with the fact that preparation and opportunity can take a moment to align. Sometimes it throws a big, fat fit. I'm here to tell you as a fellow assistant, if you fall into the latter category you are not only in the wrong, it turns out you may not be in the Transition Zone at all.

I had a conversation recently with a golf professional who told me the story of an assistant he once had with whom he constantly butted heads. The pro explained the tension between them was caused by the assistant's frustration at being ready for, but unable to attain, his own head pro position. While this was not the first time I had heard a story like this in this industry or outside, this was my first time processing it as an assistant. I was dumbfounded.

I view being an assistant as doing everything I can to make the course and my superintendent shine while learning my trade. Often, a superintendent carries the responsibility of allowing their assistant a certain amount of autonomy and room to grow. Nevertheless, at the end of the day it's your superintendent's course. Their name is on the door, their reputation is on the line, and if a head is going to roll it's going to have their hair color. This in no way means that you, the assistant, should be a simple, silent sheep. If you are truly ready for the next level, you're buzzing with ideas.

Not all of us will have the good fortune of working for people we enjoy. I am grateful to have worked for men I was glad to emulate. Conversely, you don't have to like your boss to respect your boss, and you do not have to respect your boss to carry out their orders. For example, in a planning session after I have voiced my thoughts and arguments, when my superintendent gives an order I follow it. Even if I don't agree. I don't gripe to my co-workers or crew. I do not do it my way just to prove him wrong, or purposefully wrong to prove my point.

Should your super choose to work with and address you as a partner: embrace it! Just never forget they outrank you. Just as they should not forget their course's general manager and board outranks them.

Handled correctly, this intermediary point in your career can be a great opportunity. In a way, you are able to be in two places at once. You are witnessing and operating at a superintendent level, while having a veteran there to catch you should you fall. Many lessons we must learn can be experienced in this way, saving you from having to do so once you have advanced to the next level. Of course, this will not stop you from taking your lumps your first time as captain. To share a thought from a newly minted superintendent, "Nothing short of sitting in the chair, can prepare you for how much it all changes once you're sitting in the chair."

We are not guaranteed a seat at the table. The wait can be long for some of us, but becoming stagnant or growing bitter is not the answer. The last true test of our "apprenticeship" we face as we move through the Transition Zone: Never forget our place no matter how far we've come. We must think like supers, act like supers, work like supers, but function as assistants. If this is beyond your ability, than you are not ready to be a superintendent, and thus, are not truly in the Transition Zone. **-OC**



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