

The Ethics Question

by Mark Jarrell

Imagine, if you can, a day like this:

You've just gotten the crew out of the shop and off to work. The phone in your office rings. A close friend and fellow superintendent is on the line. Swearing you to secrecy, he begins telling you of another friend and superintendent who is about to lose his job, though he is totally unaware of any dissatisfaction with his job performance. You hang up, frustrated and upset, not knowing what you should do.

You head out to the golf course to clear your head. Your best operator pulls up on the greensmower and informs you he is leaving in two weeks. You ask him why and you are told that the superintendent at the Scurvydog Country Club has offered him 50¢ more an hour to work for him.

Flabbergasted, you finish your inspection tour of the course and head to the shop for a cup of coffee. The phone rings again. It is the manager of El Pollo Verde Country Club — someone you had met at a chapter meeting several months ago. He flatters you with compliments about your reputation in the golf business and asks if you would come over to his club and take a ride around the golf course with him; there are a few problems out there that his superintendent either cannot or will not take care of. You ask him if his superintendent knows that you have been asked to do this. He answers, "No, Bill has too much pride and wouldn't respond favorably to that suggestion". After a little more coaxing, you agree to drop by later that day to help them out.

No sooner do you hang up the phone than it rings again. This time the caller is Mr. Blueblood, the greens chairman of the ultra-exclusive Ilderich Golf and Country Club. He is calling to discuss the possibility of you leaving your present position to come to work for them.

You can hardly believe your ears! This is *THE JOB!* Big money. High profile house on the golf course. Everything! Somehow you remember to ask him if the present superintendent has been informed that he is to be terminated. He says "No, the committee feels it would be best if he didn't know until the day the new superintendent is to take over".

Now what do you do? This job would be a big step forward in your career, and the only way you are going to be allowed in the game is to play by their rules. You thank Mr. Blueblood for considering you and set up an interview for the following Tuesday.

The last two phone calls have just about made you forget the unpleasantness of the early morning. You put your feet up on the desk, lean back in your chair, feeling like a Turbo Sup, when the phone rings again. On the other end is your very best friend, another superintendent, who begins, "I don't know exactly how to tell you this, but I've just heard from a very reliable source that you are about to be fired".

Quite a morning. I'll bet you can't wait to see what the afternoon has in store for you.

The series of events described above contain several examples of the kinds of situations we find ourselves in which fall under the heading "Code of Ethics". In these examples, the superintendent depicted has clearly violated the Code, has had transgressions against him, and has operated in that gray area of technicality that is used to rationalize a particular response to a given situation.

Unfortunately for our profession, since there is no "legal" recourse against violators of the Code, members tend to act only in their own best interests in far too many cases. The inconsequential threat of censorship or revocation of membership in the Association and unlikelihood that a particular violation would ever be taken that far, contribute to our members' indifferent attitude about the Code. We too often pass these violations off as "the way of the business world" and impractical to try to do anything about.

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Contributing to this attitude is the naked truth that superintendents are more often the victims of unethical business practices than the perpetrators. It is currently believed by many that 80% or more of the superintendents who have been fired in the last few years have been fired for "political" reasons — that catch-all phrase for someone terminated for reasons other than his ability to maintain a satisfactory golf course. It seems that superintendents are treated less fairly than the \$5 an hour laborers who work under them.

So what is the solution?

I suggest that the only way to affect change is by setting an example. As Albert Schweitzer put it many years ago, "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing".

Our Association has made great strides in the last few years emphasizing the professionalism of the golf course superintendent. I think it is time to emphasize the integrity of the superintendent.

To start with, we need to revise our present Code of Ethics to eliminate any and all gray areas.

Second, we need to educate and emphasize the importance of adhering to the Code to our membership; keep hammering it home at chapter meetings and frequent publication.

Third, we should implement a stronger system of review and enforcement of violations.

Finally, screen applicants more closely; make membership mean more than having a check that doesn't bounce. Perhaps new members should be made to publicly pledge to adhere to the Code at chapter meetings.

If we do these things and develop a reputation as a highly principled Association, *then* we may begin to see changes in the ways we are dealt with by club officials. It can only help our Association. Many clubs view our Association as a protective society, almost like a union, whose sole purpose is to selfishly serve the needs of superintendents. In how many recent job changes have clubs requested applicants who were not actively involved in Superintendent Associations? If this is a trend, then we must reverse it. Club officials need to perceive us as dedicated to serving the best interests of our clubs and the golf industry.

Club officials do have valid fears for utilizing the "Hand over your keys — clean out your desk — you're fired" method of termination. They have one hell of an investment to protect, which overrides any concern for ethical hiring practices. Though few and far between, we have all heard stories of the "lameduck" superintendent who robbed the place blind or damaged the course upon hearing of his impending termination, or the distraught superintendent who leaves immediately, before the club has made arrangements for a qualified replacement.

Addressing these concerns and allaying these fears will be very difficult task, but one we should attack head on if we

are to affect change. Again, the reputation and integrity of our Association may be the most important factor. If a club has employed a member of our Association, they should feel secure that their superintendent will continue to do his job conscientiously everyday he is on the job, even if he is to be terminated. It only makes sense; it is in his best interest while trying to secure a new job. They should feel secure that they will get proper and reasonable notice if the superintendent decides to leave them. They should know that if they hire a member of our Association, his personal and professional integrity has been judged by his peers; it is to everyone's advantage to eliminate the crooks in our business.

In other words, the club has to see an advantage in operating this way, as well as a disadvantage in operating the other way. I do not think a club would like to develop a reputation which would discourage most of the qualified superintendents from considering employment with them.

Many of you reading this article may feel that some of these points should be handled through legal contracts drawn up between the individual superintendent and his club, I agree. However, few superintendents presently have a contract. Awareness is the first step in facilitating change, and I feel that the discussion and publication of guidelines concerning hiring and firing practices, termination notice, severance pay, and other business practices will help bring these changes about.

I would like to see the day when the first question a greens committee asks a prospective superintendent is, "Are you a member of the Florida GCSA?". ■



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