



Palm Beach Trade Winds



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I've Got the Deed in my Hip Pocket

Would you manage your golf course any differently if you were the owner and the money was actually your very own? Our first natural defensive reaction to this question should be, "Of course not, I already operate the golf course to the very best of my ability!"

Perhaps this is true, especially from our point of view. But what about the individuals who lack the technical expertise to truly understand why we spend so much money on maintenance, when they know they can operate the department far better for far less.

Surely you've had someone propose to you, "If you can operate this golf course for less money, I'll give you the

difference." To the extreme, we could initiate many cost-saving measures such as less frequent mowings, top-dressing greens with just any sort of sand, rebuilding old equipment rather than purchasing new, eliminating your employee's vacations, and perhaps even eliminating your preventive fungicide programs. We might try this ploy for a few months. However, after the greens become too shaggy and hard, the old equipment just can not be repaired again, the employees resign, and ultimately, the greens die of a pythium outbreak, we would quickly return the money and want our job back.

This is the heart of the problem. The owners agree that we should receive the full 100% value of every dollar that we spend. I believe that if we could convince our owners that we do manage our department as if the money spent were our very own, we would overcome the economic barrier and the owner would feel at ease.

Somewhere there is a happy median blend between being frugal and being wasteful. Let us analyze a little deeper the difference in philosophy between the owner and the employee relationship. In our profession, we have been formally educated to manage the golf course to optimal conditions. This does not come cheaply! We are often severely criticized and compared to the course down the road where, too often, they also are striving for ultimate perfection. This competitive factor automatically drives the budget upward. If that club invents the wheel and incorporates an innovative process you can bet that your club will soon follow suit. You can see that we have influenced to overachieve, not underachieve. How can we back down from the overachieving philosophy, yet strive for ultimate dollar value?

Perhaps the best way to analyze philosophy is to visualize your expenses as if the money spent were your very own. First off, we might change some policies. However, seldom can policies be altered greatly from their present concept without some sort of ultimate reduction in overall quality. If we were to become more frugal, we might not purchase the very best product. Will your second choice prove to be inferior? Probably so. You can't get something for nothing.

Maybe we will purchase cheaper grades of fertilizer. I'm sure you've had someone comment to you, "The local

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hardware store is having a sale on 6-6-6 for only \$3.99 a bag!" It's immaterial that your greensmix fertilizer is six times better and only three times more expensive. The layman can only comprehend the fact that his 50 lb. bag of fertilizer is less expensive than your blend.

Maybe we could topdress the greens next week with that sand out back in the woods. Who cares if the material contains a few weed seeds and the particle sizes are too fine. The point is, the stuff is cheap and who will ever know the difference, once you pick out the shell rock. Sand is just sand, Right? Obviously we go to great lengths to lab test our existing soil and purchase the material which is best suited for sound agronomic growth. Such factors as pH, CEC, particle sizes organic content, and sterilization are key elements when ordering content, and sterilization are key elements when ordering the proper blend greensmix.

How about the superintendents who oversee. I know you can purchase last year's seed at reduced rates, not to mention some of those fancy high breeds cost far too much when common types are cheaper. After all, our priority is to make the greens look green, Right? Who cares that high breed varieties are more resistant to disease and drought, tolerate lower mowing heights, and are superior in color.

Maybe we could cut costs by spraying a curative program rather than a preventive one. I bet we could save more than 50% of the chemical budget. Don't worry about the fear of quick striking pythium disease wiping out an entire green or two within 24 hours is not caught in time, or the fear of insects gnawing on the manicured greens the day before your member/guest tournament. Much like an insurance policy, the additional cost for a preventive spray program far outweighs the potential risks.

What about equipment repairs? Maybe we could try to eliminate new equipment purchases by simply rebuilding the old for less money. This theory holds true only up to a certain point when, finally, new equipment is justified. To an outsider, it seems rather difficult to appreciate that new turfgrass mowing machinery can cost more than a new Mercedes. However, in the manufacturing world, turf equipment is considered to be relatively low volume production and therefore justifiably expensive to produce. When an automobile turns over the one hundred thousand mile mark, we quickly think of trade-in time. In our business, however, it is common to pour money into old equipment although it would have been economically more sound to trade and purchase new.

Speaking of machinery, what about purchasing after-market parts at less than original equipment manufacturer's cost. Sometimes this application appears effective. Whether the part be a bearing, seal, belt, tire, or whatever, more often than not certain specifications have been cut short. This is probably one of the most altered programs within our budget. There are risks to encounter. Contemplate the inferior strength of a whiling blade shattering, resulting in a liability suit that would be difficult to win in court.

Let's go onto the next area—people. How can we cut

costs here? Nowhere, because money speaks! In order to get good people, you have to pay good money. Sure, there are incentives, but if you take away the incentives, you can bet the employee will move on. Every year at budget time, I hear employees moan and groan because they aren't getting paid enough. What is considered enough? I believe the answer lies within the employees motivated attitude. As long as the desire exists, the employee will be productive if he is justifiably rewarded. The employee must be paid above the average norm. The Palm Beach chapter of the FGCSA conducts an excellent yearly survey that can be a valuable management tool for both the employee and the employer. Money is not everything, although more often than not this appears to be the case. The employee must feel totally fulfilled with insurance benefits, vacation pay, sick days, yearly Christmas bonuses, uniforms, and good working conditions.

At the end of the year when budget reviews preclude even a token raise, employees look elsewhere for better pay or benefits. Many clubs are experiencing greater turnover because of these budget cutbacks or minimal percentage increases. Additional training costs coupled with lower productivity due to new employees, tends to outweigh the money theoretically saved from raises. If we try to cut corners in the payroll department we will realize very little, if any economic gains.

In review, after analyzing the budget from fertilizer purchasing to the human factor, there is very little to take off the top. Perhaps we can cut the budget or reduce the percentage increase for a few years, but this only a short term gimmick. All will soon turn sour.

I believe that we, as professional golf course superintendents, manage the maintenance budget to the best of our ability. To the outsider it may appear that we are extravagant, excessive, and wasteful. Yet, when making equal comparisons with other equal-status clubs, there will seldom be a great difference in operational costs. The best way to put this into perspective is to pretend that "I've got the deed in my hip pocket and I will operate this business as if I were the owner." ■

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