

Training for the Future

by MIKE BAILEY
The Falls Country Club



Photo by Mike Bailey.

Mike gives final instructions to Art and crew about day's assignments.

Have you sat down with your assistant and clearly stated your expectations of his role? Perhaps in the beginning, disagreements will arise and perhaps someone might even want to quit his job. In order to put to rest all disagreements, the superintendent and the assistant must see clearly eye to eye and mutually respect each other's world of responsibility.

First off, what is the definition of an assistant? The answer might be "to assist the immediate supervisor in a manner to effectively operate a business." We commonly refer to the assistant golf course superintendent as simply "the assistant." This is not a problem. Everyone within the department usually understands the assistant's responsibilities. I can say over the years my overall needs for an assistant have changed, but generally, the workload has remained the same and probably will remain the same for years to come.

I believe the following

questions and answers set down a guideline for the management of an 18 hole golf course. Sure, there can be modifications and different styles of managerial practices. But this has been my style for over ten years and I can proudly say I've been associated with some great assistants because, hopefully, I have set down guidelines and expectations.

- ***Who lines up the crew at the beginning of the morning?***

In order for me to command respect from the crew, I feel a need to be on time everyday. We are blessed with a competent crew where tardiness is a rarity. Because I arrive 25 to 30 minutes before work begins, I also find the entire crew arrives ready to go anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes before work actually begins. Socializing, teasing, and light

discussion about work creates a pleasant interaction.

Weekdays at 7:00 a.m., our work day begins. We congregate around the assignment board and erase yesterday's schedule and I write down the current days assignments. The assistant contributes by reporting yesterday's progress and confirms my assignments. This procedure allows the assistant to participate from a "second level of command." The crew realizes the assistant monitors the day's activities. The crew also realizes the assistant will be the "first level of command in the field." An understanding is established between my expectations and the crew's deadline of expectations.

Also I might note, the golf course equipment manager (commonly referred to as the head mechanic) stands at the assignment board along with the rest of the crew. This allows Mr. Terry Pratto to be advised on the equipment that will be out on the golf course for the day, so that he can plan accordingly. We

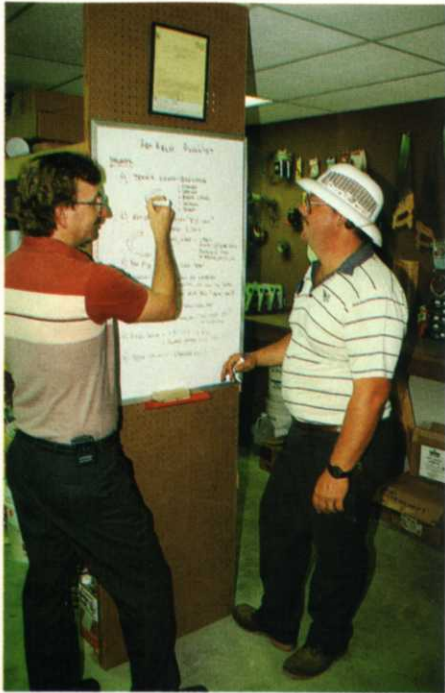


Photo by Mike Bailey.

Mike with assistant Art Helm.

also interact with employee responses on yesterday's mechanical problems and even discuss top-dressing or aerification for next week. This way, no surprises come about. All of the employees feel a part in the team concept. Here again, however, guidelines have been established. The equipment manager is third in command and reports to the assistant when the golf course superintendent is off the property.

• **Who manages the crew?**

I strongly encourage the assistant to manage the crew during the "middle" of the working day." What does this mean? Typically throughout the day, I find myself involved with other facets of managing a golf course where I will not be in tune with the performance of the work crew. This is where the assistant comes through. Our assistant is the person out on the golf course on an hourly basis, keenly monitoring the performance of the maintenance staff.

Yet the managerial assistant is not an executive. The assistant does not appear to the membership as being the golf course superintendent. The assistant is dressed in the same uniform attire as the rest of the crew, busily performing various daily responsibilities through out the golf course.

• **What do you expect from your assistant daily?**

I find a need for the assistant to be well diversified and knowledgeable about irrigation, pest management, cultural maintenance, not to mention helping to supervise the crew.

I prefer the assistant to inspect the irrigation system and the irrigation pumphouse daily. This includes the inspection of the pump motors, the pump station mechanisms, the irrigation central, setting up for appropriate irrigation needs, changing the pressure recorder and generally checking for any leaks, vandalism and any other problems associated with quality maintenance.

An assistant should review the golf course as another set of agronomic eyes. The assistant will look for disease, pest control, and review recent chemical applications. He will evaluate results and inspect the turf quality for future aerification needs, verti-cutting, top dressing, and even assist the mechanic on evaluating mowing quality performance.

• **Does an assistant need an office?**

Yes, but let's clarify what constitutes an office. Assuming the superintendent has an office complete with desk, file cabinets and a seating arrangement for meetings, does the assistant actually need such an office? I believe the answer is NO. Of course, the assistant requires a desk, file cabinet, and perhaps a few chairs for an impromptu meeting. But he needs "an office environment" appropriate to a worker, not an executive. It should have more of a storage room appearance where valuable

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items such as tools, irrigation parts and golf course supplies are kept under lock and key. A workbench for clock repairs and so on is also appropriate within the assistant's air conditioned storage/office room.

• ***When is the assistant not invited?***

In the past I have had the problem of an assistant simply walking into my office without reason. My office is not a place to socialize. I have since set up a policy to prevent these interruptions. Before anyone enters my office, he is expected to look in the window and pause. If I wave my hand to come in, please enter. If I hold up my hand with a pause, please wait. I could be in a meeting, on a phone call, or reviewing paperwork that should not be interrupted. This has greatly increased our respect for each other's sense of responsibility.

• ***Should an assistant attend meetings?***

Sometimes, it seems difficult to justify both the superintendent and the assistant attending various meetings together. While we are both off the property, who will supervise the crew? Because the assistant is employed to assist, he should stay home and "attend house."

Perhaps once or twice a year the assistant might attend a chapter meeting, an irrigation school or special seminars for CEU points for his pesticide license. The Palm Beach chapter successfully conducts the annual assistant's meeting when all assistants are urged to attend this special meeting. This way, the assistants feel they have a place within the organization.

• ***Should the assistant be salaried or paid hourly?***

I believe salaried. His job description is managerial, therefore a salaried position is more appropriate. If personal problems arise, the assistant can take time off and still receive pay, yet when the workload exceeds regular hours, all is clearly understood.

• ***Should the assistant work weekends?***

Of course! As much as we need time off, our assistant was hired with the understanding that he would work on one of the two weekend days. In our situation, the mechanic works Saturday and the assistant works Sunday. There is a reason for this particular schedule. Since Saturday follows immediately after Friday, it is hoped that all goes well for such a short time. The equipment manager feels comfortable with his role of supervising the crew. Sunday can be a different experience. Because another day has transpired and more serious problems may develop, the assistant is more qualified to handle the work load.

Exceptions do occur. Vacations, special occasions, and sickness often create a need to switch work days. Of course, I am only a phone call away to help when needed, but I find their sense of responsibility is best appreciated if they tackle the weekend problems on their own.

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• Does the assistant have the authority to hire and fire?

Yes. Years ago I received complaints about employee competency. I found myself with the responsibility of firing so-called incompetent employees because the assistant could not work with certain employees. Typically the new hires were no better than the previous so-called incompetent employees. I have authorized the assistant to become more involved with scrutinizing managerial needs. If an employee fails to perform, I now allow the assistant to get involved with the problems. If the problems are not resolved, the assistant will become burdened with the training of a new hire and try to improve the situations over the last employee. Sometimes this does not occur. In such cases, I now find the assistant has more patience and he works more closely with crew members. It's easy to fire, but it's not easy to hire, especially a better new hire.

• Are you managing an assistants training school?

In my case, no. My job description is quite extensive. Sometimes I believe my job description could best be stated as, "DO EVERYTHING." Yes, I enjoy the challenge and responsibility of my job. Because of this, I need a good assistant. The individual must be devoted to the industry, be honest, loyal and, most importantly, have a willingness to spend a few years with me. No, I can not afford to lose an assistant once a year. I then would have to step back, punt and retrain. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to train employees.

I have developed the "on deck circle program" within the maintenance staff. I always try to have a person on the crew that is looking for advancement. Hopefully this individual is interested in

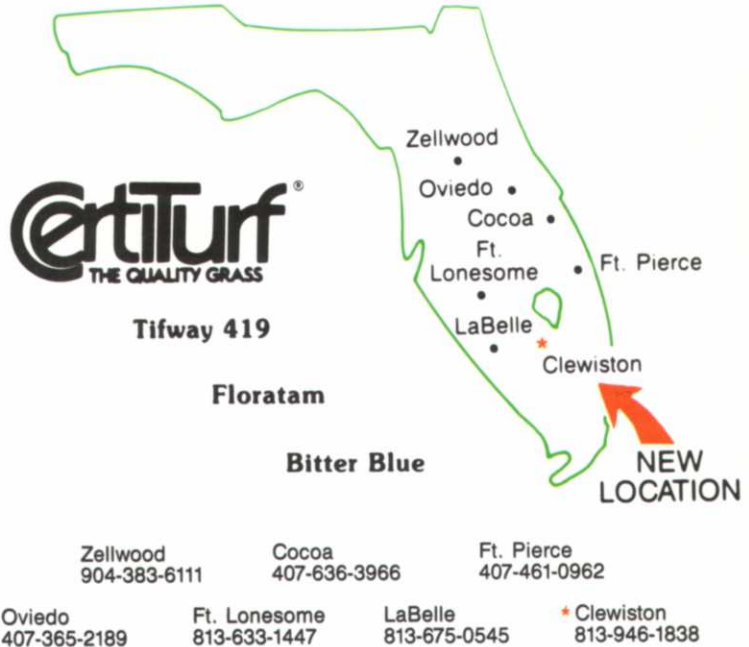


Photo by Mike Bailey.
Assistant golf course superintendent Art Helm watches over chemical mixture.

working his way up the ladder. Proper formal education is important along with practical field experience. By the time the assistant moves on, the "on deck circle" assistant is ready and willing.

The new assistant will come to bat having a full knowledge of the game plan and he will clearly see eye to eye with me on what is expected of him as assistant.

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