

Retaining focus



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Golf course superintendent Jim Kellogg hardly contains his frustration when he finishes inspecting the Water and Sands Golf Course, which has been the pride of the community for decades. It's best known to golfers for tree-lined fairways winding around two small lakes. The maintenance crew has done a great job – the 12 holes in the woods have never looked better.

The opening three holes and closing three holes, however, are on an open, flat plain. These holes – characterized by large, eye-catching bunkers – are the face of the course to the community. But the bunkers frustrate Jim. The crew just can't get them right. Too often, the edges are irregular and the symmetric contours that characterize the course are frequently absent. After Jim chastises the crew, the bunkers look better for a few days, but then performance slips. Jim doesn't want to chastise the crew again and is looking for a different approach.

The problem doesn't appear to be training because the crew knows how to do the job – they just don't do a consistently great job. The crew doesn't focus on bunker quality long enough to develop the routine to do an exceptional job continually. Jim needs to address three issues and revise his approach to the problem.

Learning doesn't ensure performance. Think about what happens when someone changes his golf swing. It only takes hours or days to learn a new swing. However, it takes weeks or months to use the new swing consistently. For those weeks and months, the golfer must concentrate on using the corrected swing continually. Eventually, the new swing becomes a habit.

For whatever reason, Jim's crew doesn't have the right "swing" for the bunkers. The procedures they often use are flawed. Correcting them will be like a golfer changing his swing. Relearning the correct procedures is easy, but focusing on the correct procedure until it becomes a habit is challenging.

Jim excels at learning/relearning but lacks the follow-through to maintain the crew's focus until the learning/relearning becomes a habit. The focus must be maintained through positive redirectional feedback (correcting without blaming because the employees are trying).

Jim's chastising probably hasn't worked because he hasn't followed through to coach

the crew until the relearned bunker procedures have become a habit. Jim must focus more on continual, positive redirectional feedback to maintain focus until the correct bunker procedures become a habit.

Keeping score. My friends and I play golf almost every Saturday morning. Every week we keep score, but we really don't care who wins. So why do we keep score? Because keeping score increases our focus. Jim needs to record performance similarly. By using the score to maintain focus, everyone can "win." For most work tasks, there's no obvious score, but green speed and golfer satisfaction ratings are used at some golf facilities.

Jim has a clear picture of excellent-looking bunkers. The crew has a fuzziest picture, so Jim needs to provide clarity for his bunker expectations. Given that circumstances have brought bunker improvement to the top of the priority list, some type of scoring system would signal this importance to the crew and help maintain focus.

Consequences for poor performance. I recently was asked to go to lunch by a colleague, and when I arrived, he was visibly upset. I asked him what was wrong, and he said: "Because you're so late, we'll have to wait at least a half-hour to get a table." I was frustrated because I thought I had arrived when expected. My perception was that I had been treated unfairly.

Fairness is the key to excellent employee relationships. Employees perceive they're being treated unfairly when unexpected consequences are imposed, just as I did when I was reprimanded for arriving late. The key to fairness with reprimands is to be clear in advance about what constitutes unacceptable performance and what the consequences will be. It appears that Jim's chastising occurs when his frustration gets to a certain level. I suspect the crew perceives they're being treated unfairly.

When poor performance is specified clearly and the consequences for unexpected performance are spelled out, employees can make a choice to perform and not incur the consequence or not perform and incur the consequences. They still won't be happy when the consequence is imposed, but they're much less likely to feel they've been treated unfairly because they made the choice to not perform and the consequence was a result of that decision.

Currently, there are no effective conse-

quences when Jim's crew performs poorly. There's no clear definition of poor performance, so Jim's chastising appears random and unfair to the crew. So Jim decides to do the following:

Step 1: Develop scores such as:

1. The bunker has perfectly smooth edges and is beautifully contoured;
2. The bunker has smooth edges and is contoured nicely but lacks the striking beauty that can be achieved only some of the time;
3. The bunker looks as good as it can given the current unfavorable weather conditions; and
4. The bunker has uneven edges and/or unsightly contouring.

Furthermore, Jim has taken pictures that represent scores one through four and decided good performance means no No. 4s and at least 50 percent No. 1s.

Jim also decides that if increased focus doesn't improve the bunkers, he'll impose the following consequences:

- First failure: The bunkers will be redone using the usual equipment; and
- Second failure: The bunkers will be redone using only hand rakes.

Step 2: Jim meets with the crew to discuss the importance of bunkers and to detail his new system of identifying great bunker performance and his expectations for great-looking bunkers.

Step 3: Jim uses positive redirectional feedback to maintain the focus on correct procedures to ensure great-looking bunkers. He forces himself to maintain this coaching as a priority until procedures for great looking bunkers become automatic to the crew.

Step 4: Only if the crew doesn't respond to steps one through three does Jim mention the consequences. This keeps the initial focus on the positive. The first consequence of unacceptable performance is the introduction of the consequences. They're enforced when the next failure occurs.

Fortunately, steps one through three in Jim's plan are successful, and step four isn't needed.

This example might seem unnecessarily cumbersome and structured to you, but it best illustrates the issues: learning doesn't ensure performance, keeping score and consequences for poor performance. Only you can determine how to implement these at your facility most effectively. GCN