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Don't know, don't care

It's basketball season, so it seems appropriate to relate the great old story about Frank Layden, the pudgy, nerdy-looking former coach of the NBA's Utah Jazz.

Layden had a player on one of his teams who, despite all attempts at coaching, just didn't seem to be able to execute the plays properly. The fed-up Layden finally confronted him and demanded, "What is it with you? Is it ignorance or apathy?" The player thought about it for a second and then replied, "Coach, I don't know, and I don't care."

I'm probably as guilty as anyone else of using those dreaded words, "Don't know" and "Don't care," but as I grow older, I worry ignorance and apathy are the two greatest enemies we face in nearly every walk of life, including our happy little industry.

Consider this: I have a 14-year-old son. He does quite well in school, yet I'm occasionally shocked at what he doesn't know about American history. The other day, I mentioned Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale, and he looked at me blankly. I sarcastically said, "You know ... the guy who played The Skipper on 'Gilligan's Island.'" He punched me on the shoulder for that one.

(Note: I call this the "Nintendo Effect." The brain of a teenager only has so much room, and if a choice has to be made between remembering the difference between Nathan Hale and Alan Hale Jr. versus remembering the cheat codes for "Super Mario," something has to give.)

Yet, I consider myself fortunate to have a kid who – I hope – defies these statistics from a recent study of American high school students:

- 59 percent could name all of the Three Stooges, but only 41 percent could name all three branches of government.
- Three quarters (74 percent) knew Bart Simpson makes his cartoon home in the mythical Springfield, but only 12 percent knew that Abraham Lincoln grew up in the very real Springfield, Ill.
- Only 2 percent knew James Madison was the father of the Constitution, while 100 percent knew that K-Fed is Brittany Spears' "baby-daddy."

OK, I made up that last bit (although it's probably not far from true). But the point is we, as a nation, are so focused on

the immediate or completely unfocused on anything that we've allowed ignorance and apathy to fill the void.

So, are you wondering what the heck this diatribe has to do with managing golf courses? Glad you asked. I will assume – because I know all of our beloved readers are intelligent, educated and, might I add, attractive – the issue isn't ignorance. Instead, let's consider the problem of apathy for a minute. Allow me to pose some questions:

- Have you ever thought or said, "That's the way we've always done it, so it must be right"?
- When is the last time you reviewed the policies you have in place and decided to 'blow them up' and start over?
- Can you honestly say you've brainstormed with other managers recently about the best way to attract or retain players/members?
- Have you ever written a letter to a local commissioner, congressman or other elected official to promote or defend the golf industry?
- How often do you visit other courses to seriously scrutinize what they do better than you?
- When is the last time you sat down with an employee and asked them how you could improve the operation?

Do you simply assume water, pesticides, fertilizers and other controversial tools will magically always be there when you need them?

- Are you limping along with a key employee who's more of a liability than an asset?
- Conversely, are you doing anything to grow and develop the great employees you have or just hoping they'll stick around?
- Have you ever thought very critically about your own skill set and made a plan to strengthen your management weaknesses?
- Do you automatically dismiss the opinions of employees or other managers because they 'just don't understand' your situation?
- Do you believe management techniques from other industries can't possibly be applied to your business?
- Are the words, "continuous improve-

ment," part of your business vocabulary?

- Do you assume because of budget or other limitations you can't be the best at something, so why bother trying?

I challenge everyone who reads this – superintendents, owners, general managers and others – to think about and answer those questions as candidly as possible. It's not a particularly fun activity, but in today's market, it's a painful but necessary process. It works. Let me tell you why.

Recently, I visited the headquarters of the Ariens Co., a major manufacturer of mowing equipment that primarily focuses on the landscape, lawn care and consumer markets. My mindset going into the trip was, "I can't learn anything from these guys because they're not big in the golf business." Wrong.

Ariens has instituted a companywide lean management philosophy. It's too complicated to detail in this space, but the short version is they constantly challenge every process, every step in every process and every substep in every step. It recognizes each unnecessary process, step and substep equals waste ... and waste costs money and

causes frustration. It's an employee-driven concept that assumes workers are intelligent and concerned. That, as you might have realized, is the opposite of ignorance and apathy.

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One of the guiding principles of this management concept is summarized in a simple quote: "Best is the evil enemy of better." Think about it. Too many managers and businesses reject the notion of "better" (continuous improvement) because "best" is too hard to achieve. That, my friends, is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Golf is like a fertile plot, waiting for the seeds of the continuous improvement movement to be sowed. You can sit on your butt thinking things are OK, bitch about the economy, fret about the weather or curse the competition. Or you can take matters into your own hands, fix things and prosper.

"Don't know" and "don't care" will lead to "don't survive" in the 21st-century golf market. Apathy kills. Don't be a victim.

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