

# Developing as a leader

**L**eadership. What does this often-used word mean to you? What does a leader do? What do you, as a golf course superintendent, do to excel as a leader?

To help realize your leadership potential, you must first understand that leadership needs to be distinguished from management, and what you do as a leader needs to be explored in detail.

My favorite definition of leadership, as expressed by author Marcus Buckingham, is: "Great leaders rally people to a better future." The focus of leadership should be on engaging and motivating a golf facility's work force.

To rally people to a better future, a leader must be able to discover what's universal among his followers. Why Rudy Giuliani become the person we associate with leadership after 9/11? Leadership experts suggest our acknowledgment of Giuliani as a leader began with his answer to a question during a press conference that awful day. Giuliani was asked what he thought the final body count would be. He didn't pass the question to others or talk about numbers; rather, his answer captured the emotion every American was feeling: "It will be more than we can bear." He had voiced what was in our hearts, and we were ready to follow him.

A leader must discover what's universal and capitalize on it. What's universal among your staff?

To understand leadership more clearly, let's look at three functions a leader must do successfully: set direction, plan strategically and develop human capital.

## Set direction

When setting direction, your focus should be on articulating the golf course's mission; a compelling vision; a significant purpose and core values; and the engagement of leadership team members, workers and service providers to fulfill the mission or vision.

I recently asked two maintenance employees from different clubs what they do. The first employee, answering haltingly, said, "I mow grass." The second employee, responding quickly with a smile, said, "We provide a great golfing experience for our members."

Note the difference. The second employee understands the contribution the

course makes and views himself as part of a team. The first employee just mows grass. Which employee is more motivated? Which employee would you rather have on your staff? The difference likely lies with the skills of the golf course superintendent and club leadership. So, can you set direction better?

## Plan strategically

Strategic planning includes brainstorming, analysis and selection of long-term strategies to improve a golf facility's success and financial health. Such strategies include expansions, organizational learning, identification of competitive opportunities and evaluation of benefits from new ventures.

Good strategic planning requires an understanding of the external factors impacting a facility. Positive factors that have benefited golf courses throughout the years include the increasing affluence of the American public, the emphasis on outdoor activities, the increasing number of healthy retirees, the emergence of golf on television and the excitement created by Tiger Woods.

Additional emerging factors that impact facilities are:

- The land occupied by many courses is valuable. For example, several courses in the Twin Cities have been sold for business, home or condominium development.
- The competition for recreational time and money is more intense. Every year, amusement parks become more prevalent and spectacular. The number of special events, festivals, recreational leagues, activities at local/regional/state/national parks continues to expand and become more attractive as they creatively attract participants.

- A recent study concluded young men and women in their early years in the work force have less available money to spend than those in previous decades. The leading causes were the cost of owning a home and the size of college loan payments.

- The lack of retirement money and plans might cause many baby boomers to return to the work force part time or full time in new jobs or careers.

You have a leadership responsibility to work with others to plan for the future of the facility and to keep those plans in mind as you lead your staff. For example, a su-

perintendent at an aging club in a growing suburban community was concerned about the future of the course and his position. When he visited with the pro, club manager and several board members, he discovered almost everyone had the same concern but nothing was happening. After further conversations, he, the pro and club manager asked to visit with the board of directors to discuss their concerns. The outcome: A small group was selected to work with a strategic planning firm to address the future of the course. The superintendent was pleased to be included in the small group.

## Develop human capital

Human capital development involves identifying and improving leadership team members and their roles, responsibilities and performance expectations. A key emphasis is your professional development and that of the facility's leadership.

I've taught seminars for superintendents for more than 10 years, and I am impressed with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's educational program and the interest superintendents have in professional development.

At the same time, I see two areas with great opportunities for improvement. The first is superintendents getting involved in leadership of a facility. In most cases, the superintendent has the most formal and informal training of the leaders. The GCSAA has recognized this need by emphasizing seminars and defining what participants will take back to their courses. Superintendents need to look for opportunities to provide leadership at their facilities.

The second opportunity is career development and planning. Not all of you want to or are able to continue as superintendents into your fifties and sixties. Unfortunately, the next logical career steps are limited. This is one area where you must provide leadership for yourselves. Think about what you plan to do throughout your career and retirement. Everyone should have a professional improvement plan, which should include preparation to excel in your current position and to prepare yourself for the next steps in your career.

Great leaders rally people to a better future. You need to apply this leadership in yourself, your golf course maintenance staff and your facility. GCN



Robert A. Milligan, Ph.D., is professor emeritus from Cornell University and senior consultant with Madison, Wis.-based Dairy Strategies. He can be reached at 651-647-0495 or rmilligan@trsmith.com.