

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

Superintendents become
more well rounded through
soft skills educational programs.

BY STEVE & SUZ TRUSTY

Face it. Working in the real world presents multiple challenges in areas many golf course superintendents didn't learn about in school. The soft skills part of the job, such as communication and leadership, seldom has been addressed in-depth within the curriculum of an agronomic or earth sciences major, including four-year and two-year turfgrass management programs.

As more superintendents' time is devoted toward managing the golf facility beyond turfgrass conditions, additional emphasis on soft skills is being incorporated into some of the college-level education programs. But they still have a long way to go to match on-the-job realities.

"About 38 percent of a superintendent's time is spent on the nonagronomic segments of golf course management," says Sandy Queen, CGCS, a member of the GCSAA board of directors and manager of golf operations for the city of Overland Park, Kan. "For today's superintendent, the business skills are just as critical as the agronomic skills."

That telling data was included in the results of the member profile survey (the results of which hadn't been released at press time), which the GCSAA board spent time reviewing during a board meeting in late June.

PINPOINTING SKILL AREAS

Soft skills don't necessarily fit into neat little packages. What elements are involved in areas such as communications or leadership? One approach to defining a skill is identifying its impact on the big picture of job performance. That's the basis the GCSAA uses to identify job needs and then put together its educational offerings to address them. (See sidebar on page 74.)

Because GCSAA conference-related seminars vary every year, with different presenters for similar courses, the number of attendees for each session also varies. Though superintendents recognize the need for continuing education in non-agronomic areas, the soft skill type of seminars aren't as well attended as the turf-related ones.

The general "how to advance in your career" sessions have been among the most successful,

says Lyne Tumlinson, GCSAA director of career services. They're targeted to those looking for a position – those in a position seeking to do their current job better and those geared toward advancing. Education about improving one's soft skills is part of these sessions.

The hands-on computer training sessions also are well received at the conference, although the hands-on component limits the number of attendees. These are taught by GCSAA staff and cover different skills such as how to use computer programs like Excel and PowerPoint for presentations, as well as Internet skills.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

At the university level, whatever the degree, the focus is on the major. At the management level in the real world, the technical issues continually are integrated with the personnel issues, financial issues and communication issues, says Bruce Burger, CGCS, at the Quarry Golf Club in San Antonio. Burger earned a bachelor of science degree in geology at Steven F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He started working at a golf course in Austin during high school and continued working there during college. The hands-on training along with the classroom work helped him put the big picture in perspective.

Mark Murphy, golf course superintendent for Virginia Oaks Golf Course in Gainesville, Va., says growing grass is the easy part of the job.

"But turf programs just touch on the business-related aspects you face," says Murphy, who earned his bachelor of science degree in agronomy at Auburn University.

Golf course management was always Murphy's goal, so he started his career with the determination to develop long-term goals and the realization that updating his skills and knowledge continually would be needed.

Queen and Rafael Barajas, CGCS, at Hacienda Golf Club of La Habra Heights, Calif., started full-time work on golf courses immediately after high school and didn't attend college.

"Whatever your position, you need to assess the priorities and see what's needed for you to get



them," Barajas says. "I was routing my success from the point I started as a golf course crew-member, though not specifically step by step at the beginning. I set goals and knew achieving them would be more of a challenge not having a formal education. I wanted to become a certified golf course superintendent."

As the complexity of a superintendent's role has increased throughout the years, so have the opportunities for continuing education. The Internet has expanded the options. Along with GCSAA sessions (see sidebar at right), chapters offer a broad range of educational and networking opportunities. The GCSAA also provides additional self-study courses that are textbook based along with online courses, virtual classroom courses and webcasts.

Universities provide online educational sessions ranging from a single course to Penn State's advanced turfgrass management certificate and bachelor of science degree in turfgrass science. Opportunities to take or audit classroom courses are offered by many universities and community colleges. Adult computer skills and financial and communication classes are offered in many communities with sessions held in public libraries or local high schools.

Golf management companies often provide targeted seminars for the golf course superintendents they employ. Sometimes municipalities also provide general management sessions about safety and other personnel issues. Turfgrass and other green industry associations offer educational sessions about many management aspects at their conferences.

"My employer and immediate boss recognize the importance of investing in continuing education," Queen says. "They've been supportive as I've worked toward my career goals. They've also supported and encouraged my involvement in the Heart of America GCSA chapter and the national association."

One of the strongest aspects of ongoing education comes through mentoring. Repeatedly, superintendents credit their experiences working with successful superintendents as a primary factor in helping advance their careers.

With so many resources, opportunities to learn new skills or enhance existing ones are accessible despite a superintendent's geographic location or work schedule.

"If you don't learn, it's because you don't want to," Barajas says.

Educational outreach

The GCSAA's body of knowledge curriculum encompasses five categories: communication, leadership, operations management, personal skills and resource utilization, followed by 48 competencies and a plethora of performance statements that address each competency.

"It's obvious from the categories, the soft skills are very much a part of our curriculum," says Shari Koehler, GCSAA director of education. "The GCSAA places a great deal of importance on the development of these skills, as well as keeping up with the technical skills needed to be successful."

Instead of focusing on specific individual topics, the education is aimed at building skills and competencies.

"We receive good feedback on all of our educational offerings and monitor that to adjust the curriculum as needed each year," Koehler says. "The soft skills tend to be about one-third of the content, though we don't design it based on specific percentages within the curriculum. We map the curriculum as it relates to the body of knowledge and plan to have seminars that address all those things. The goal is an overall curriculum that's relevant and well rounded."

Some of those offerings are in the form of sessions in conjunction with the annual Golf Industry Show. Conference sessions vary every year as the association offers a revised curriculum and the body of knowledge changes.

"The soft-skill areas always are included among the topics, but we realize we tend to gravitate toward our strengths," says Lyne Tumlinson, GCSAA director of career services. "The agronomic area is where superintendents excel. It's necessary to keep up with the technology and research that directly applies to their agronomic work at the course, so superintendents do gravitate toward the agronomic offerings."

There also are those interested in leadership opportunities within the association and its chapters. It offers networking and educational opportunities to assist with those goals. The leadership skills apply at golf courses and within local communities.

"Apart from the conference and regional seminars, we have a Superintendent Leadership Series that offers communication- and leadership-focused educational programs in half-day and one-day formats," Koehler says. "A faculty member goes to the chapter site to conduct these sessions, which fit in well with chapter meetings."

The GCSAA tries to incorporate soft skills in all seminars.

"It's more subtle than a focused class, but it's there, and the attendees benefit from it," Koehler says. "It comes through the action plan contained within the seminar that asks the superintendents to evaluate what they learned, how it applies to their course, who they should relay this information to and what they're going to say to communicate that. This helps them point to the return on investment and the benefit."

The GCSAA sees a distinction between the needs of those just out of turf school and the more seasoned assistant superintendents who've had more education in these areas through course work and experience on the course. The association doesn't have a specific separate curriculum or set of competencies for assistants. They're apprentices to superintendents, so the same categories and competencies apply.

"The GCSAA has an assistant superintendent committee that we gain much information from that helps guide our program," Koehler says. "We offer an assistant superintendent webcast that's focused to them. The assistant superintendent track at our conference directs them to some of the content that might maximize their time there."

"In 2008 in Orlando, we'll debut a new event for assistants, a networking session, so they can learn from the experience of other superintendents and other assistants," she adds. "That's a direct result of discussion and outcomes from the assistant superintendent committee. We realize the importance of understanding from the superintendents what they need from their assistants so that information can help the assistants to supply that and work on developing their career paths." GCI

PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

One of the most common areas of learning during the early to middle stages of a superintendent's career is personnel management. Personnel issues might be the biggest challenge and range from finding potential employees, to evaluating applicants and hiring effectively, to managing the human resource work after they're hired.

"Dealing with the employees and different personalities you face, and bringing all those people together to work as a team and achieve a common goal, is essential to successful course management," Murphy says.

On-the-job experience plays a big role. The fundamental principles must be learned, but the management style evolves with the individual.

"Much has to be learned on your own, interacting with different personalities and people, and getting your own experience to develop your own style," says Burger, adding that the best guideline is the golden rule.

Working for a municipality, Queen has access to the city's HR and legal departments for employment issues. Their guidance in multiple areas, including how to hire effectively and work with government regulations, has been extremely beneficial, he says.

For Barajas, the initial formal training about personnel issues came through a three-day, in-depth training session put on by the golf management company he was working for.

"I was 21 years old, and that training session really opened my eyes," he says.

Murphy recommends superintendents take a class about how to hire for their needs. The GCSAA offers these types of classes.

"The one I attended was a regional seminar conducted by the golf management company I was working for at the time," he says. "One aspect covered to maximize payroll dollars was using part-time employees assigned to certain tasks to augment your full-time crew. Your crew is on and off the course faster with less time wasted in travel between tasks."

FINANCIAL SKILLS

Financial skills is another area lacking in college programs. More often, superintendents are being asked to have a better handle on the financial aspect of the golf course, managing a multimillion-dollar asset for owners, Burger says. Superintendents have to understand the balance sheet. Burger has taken GCSAA classes about financial management and personnel management.

"The classes helped a lot because they were so targeted, providing a great deal of usable information in a concise format," he says. "I prepare and submit a budget, but I also keep my own records and track expenses monthly."

Golf course management is a business and superintendents have to treat it as such, Barajas says.

"You must have a budget, do your due diligence and stick to it," he says. "You have to be prudent with the finances."

Superintendents need the ability to understand financial spread sheets, projection cost analysis and agronomic depreciation schedules, Queen says.

"We need to understand acronyms such as ROI (return on investment) to participate in budget and financial sessions and strategic planning meetings," he says. "Invest in whatever training it takes to become competent in these areas. You can't effectively manage the golf course without them."


COMPUTER SKILLS

Community college courses are the route many superintendents use to learn or improve their computer skills. Many superintendents suggest taking a class that combines financial skills with the use of the Excel program to manage spreadsheets. Two other areas of expertise are word processing – everything from memos to formal correspondence – and PowerPoint for effective presentations.

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Most recent college graduates will be competent in these computer skills already. Lack of gaining them can become a stigma for older superintendents. Resistance to adapting new technology in one area might cause superiors to question one's ability to adapt in other areas.

COMMUNICATIONS

Superintendents have to be proactive when opening the lines of communication and responsible for ensuring everyone who needs to be kept in the loop is well informed.

"I heard that during a lecture session, and it's one of the most important things I learned in any classroom," Burger says. "I'm responsible for every communication aspect that impacts, or has the potential to impact, every part of my job. That concept is something I take to work with me and put into practice every day."

Superintendents need to be better communicators, improving written and verbal skills.

"As we get more involved in the financial and other business aspects of the course, we need those skills to take part in strategic meetings and support our initiatives through technical writing and computerized presentations," Queen says.

Classroom training in these skills at universities and community colleges provide some immediate feedback many superintendents find beneficial. Others prefer working with their networking resources to hone these skills.

GET INVOLVED

In addition to gaining skills through educational opportunities, superintendents are focusing on community and chapter and national association involvement to become more well rounded and valuable. Serving on committees and in leadership roles within the associations helps hone their skills as they give back to the industry. Teaching others through guest sessions at high schools, community colleges and community associations helps deliver important messages while establishing a more professional image for the superintendent.

"If you put what you've learned to work, you'll learn even more," Barajas says.

THE IDEAL PACKAGE

Superintendents suggest those entering a university program for golf course management major in agronomy and minor in business administration. They also suggest combining that with as much hands-on experience as possible while attending school.

When it comes to personnel management, it helps to have done all the jobs your crew will be doing. That combination is the ideal package for the business of golf course management. **GCI**

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