



# BUILD UP A CAREER

SUPERINTENDENTS NEED VERSATILITY, OPTIMISM  
AND BUSINESS SAVVY TO SUCCEED

BY MICHAEL COLEMAN

**W**elcome to the challenge of life – a career. Between the jagged rocks and the icy slopes, there's a path to the top for those that are up to it. Reaching the pinnacle of your career is like climbing Mount Everest – you need to hang on because an avalanche of challenges will convince you it's just that.

The real question is: Can you reach this goal?

To get to the top of the mountain, you have to keep your professional eye on the summit, whether it's a prized location or maybe the perfect family scenario. Achieving success as a golf course superintendent depends on how you define it and go about it.

"I never targeted myself for any one club or name," says Jon Jennings, CGCS, who's been at the Chicago Golf Club for the past eight years. "You also need to have a clear vision and communicate with the people

considered as a career progresses, especially if you have a family.

"We've discussed it openly with our children and let them know there's a possibility we could move at some point," Jennings says. "They're aware of it ... but I don't know that it makes it any easier."

Balancing family priorities can have a significant impact on a career. For those who strive to keep the family happy, a lot of movement might not be the best option. Not every family can pick up and move like a MASH unit.

Experience in many areas contributes to a successful career, says Joe Baidy, CGCS, at The Alps Club in Moscow. Willing to relocate doesn't hurt, either. Armed with an agronomy degree from Penn State and experience at well-conditioned golf courses, Baidy landed the position in Russia after previous stints at Oak Hill Country Club in Rochester, N.Y.; Fox Chapel Golf Club in Pittsburgh; Acacia County Club in Lyndhurst, Ohio; and Turning Stone Casino Resort in Verona, N.Y.

However, relocating doesn't guarantee success. Charles Dey has been the superintendent at Springdale Golf Club in Princeton, N.J., since joining the club in 1974. His professional position at Springdale was his second one.

"I thought it would be a stepping stone and I could move on to any place I wanted," he says.

"And then I thought, 'Why not make this a place to have a career?'"

Since that day, Dey has been improving the course while his experience and knowledge have grown, bringing the club up the ranks along with him. He attributes his ability to balance career and family as a factor of his success in life.

"I was very fortunate," Dey says. "I still have the same wife, and I put two kids through college."

Family time is seen as optional in the eyes of some employers, says Joe Flaherty, CGCS. The 42-year veteran has been able to successfully balance family and career through his progression at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, N.J., from 1964 to 1999 and, since then, in his position as superintendent at Hyatt Hills Golf Course in Clark, N.J.

"The biggest pitfall, as far as career development and maintenance, are the absolutely crazy hours some courses ask guys to work," Flaherty says.

Working 60 or even 70 hours a week has become too common at many courses, Flaherty believes, and is a pitfall he's been able to avoid throughout the years.

"To me, you're not well-rounded if you're working those kinds of hours as a young person," he says.

Flaherty encourages assistant superintendents to find a balance and use time off to re-

that work for you, whether it be your assistant, technicians or staff."

Jennings' approach has been to keep an open mind about opportunities. If an opening put him on a road to where he wanted to go, he looked into it. He started as an assistant at the private Onondaga Golf & Country Club near Syracuse, N.Y., and then at En-Joie Golf Club, a municipal course in Endicott, N.Y. Then he stepped up to Hiland Golf Club, a resort in Queensbury, N.Y., and later Patterson Golf Club in Fairfield, Conn., a private club where he was superintendent for seven years.

Relocating is a job aspect that needs to be



Photo: Dreamstime.com

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**-JOE FLAHERTY, CGCS**

charge because it's difficult to be sharp at work if you never get a chance at downtime. Worse than that, it's hard on the family constantly working 10- to 12-hour days.

“You can do it, but it'll wreck your personal life,” he says.

Overworked staff is often caused by poor management, says Flaherty, who was president of the Golf Course Superintendent Association of New Jersey in 1978-79. High-quality superintendents don't simply work their staff until dark; they plan ahead and manage the crew so tasks are completed in an efficient time frame. Because keeping experienced staff helps a club run better, treating employees fairly is good business, good management and good for your career.

**KEEP LEARNING**

As far as successful maintenance operations are concerned, Dey encourages superintendents to be frugal with money and understand budgets, which isn't a common skill right out of college. In other words, Dey suggests superintendents re-

spect the courses for which they're responsible.

“Treat it like it's your own, but remember it's not yours,” he says.

Dey also reminds veterans to stay hungry and be open-minded. Learning from a technically savvy assistant can be a bonus for veterans that started before computers were on every desktop.

Baidy also says learning is important. He attends seminars, conferences and GCSAA activities to keep abreast with new trends in the business. Complacency can be a drag on one's career advancement, he warns. Assistant superintendents should look at options outside a traditional superintendent position such as course construction, irrigation installation and commercial opportunities.

Jennings says he generally attends his compliment of classes for continuing education in fewer than two years – but he doesn't stop there because learning is crucial to being the best you can be.

“The information is growing so fast, you've got to stay on top of it,” says Lyne Tumlinson, director of career services for the GCSAA.

Tumlinson recommends focusing on the areas that might hold a superintendent back. For superintendents with more experience, it's the skills far from turf care that tend to lag behind.

“A lot of them don't have as much knowledge or education in the areas of business, communications and leadership,” she says.

While the soft skills such as leadership and communications are helped by experience, educational opportunities can speed learning significantly. The GCSAA has numerous classes on its Web site to address common gaps.

In addition to learning, just keeping a positive attitude and enjoying the work and coworkers is

a big part of success.

“I'm pleased with my career,” Baidy says. “I've been connected with golf since I was a caddy at the age of nine, for more than 50 years. I enjoy the challenges and people I've met during my career.”

**BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

Remembering the names of colleagues one meets is beneficial, too, Jennings says. Little things like that help you stand out from others and can lead to opportunities to discuss the next phase of your career.

“The key is, when you meet someone, to follow up with them,” Jennings says. “Send an e-mail or a quick note afterward to help the memory of you stick in their mind so that if, down the road, there's something you might need assistance with, that person recalls who you are.”

All superintendents need to build relationships at the local and national levels, Tumlinson says. She recommends finding a superintendent that holds the kind of position to which you aspire, get together with him and learn the profile of his career and how he attained success.

Dey agrees networking is an important factor to success, especially for younger professionals. He recalls working side by side with his first superintendent and talking with him even after getting the Springdale job. When you have a good relationship with colleagues at nearby clubs, even borrowing equipment occasionally is a possibility.

**EXPERIENCE AND MENTORS**

For younger professionals, versatility comes in handy. Early on in a career, a superintendent should plan ahead, examine all the options and

**Education shift**

➤ Education is an integral part of a superintendent's success. Here's an eight-year comparison:

	1998	2006
Master's and beyond	3%	3%
Bachelor degree	37%	44%
Associate degree	23%	24%
One to two year certificate	17%	13%

Source: GCSAA

not jump at the first plausible opportunity. Tumlinson cautions that some rookie assistants say, "I'm gonna go to the highest level private club," but they don't look at all their options.

Superintendents shouldn't limit themselves once they've chosen a path either. It's quite possible to move from a public course to a private one or vice versa because the skills needed at both are similar.

"There's not a great deal of difference between private, where I've been all my life, and the place I'm at now, a high-end municipal course," Flaherty says.

The size of a club is something to think about because larger facilities often give assistants opportunities to grow, Tumlinson says. They can learn about negotiating, budgeting and planning, how to run a crew and top-flight management skills.

"If they don't know those things before they get to be a superintendent, they aren't going to last very long," she says.

Tumlinson believes the best first job is a quality internship that gives you a look at the entire industry.

"If they spend their internship raking bunkers then they're not going to get an idea of operating any kind of facility," she says. "But if they spend their internships learning about the profession, then they'll be better prepared."

Whatever your goals, you should make the best use of your time gaining experiencing to get to the top, but you should be patient as well.

"It's a fact – assistants today have to remain assistants longer than they did 10 years ago," Tumlinson says. "But it's invaluable time under the right mentor."

A mentor, too, is critical to your long-term success, especially at the beginning of your career. Finding your first position should be as much about finding an excellent mentor as it is about location, prestige or pay. A mentor will help you learn how to deal with agronomic issues, but the nuances of the political pitfalls at a highly visible course can be a bigger challenge to navigate without a guide.

Being hired at a top-notch club isn't as hard as one might think, Dey says. He recommends assistants approach the superintendents they work for directly and offer to take on whatever work is available.

"There's always a job out there, and if you shine, they're gonna move you up," Dey says. **GCI**

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## Common-sense guidelines

Some say having a successful career depends on one's ability and attitude, as well as following some common-sense guidelines.

1. Pay attention – most superintendents that get fired aren't doing this.
2. Hire good people – those that are as happy with their job as you are with yours.
3. Be a jack of all trades.
4. Play golf at your course and others to get a true read on conditions.
5. Attend seminars and take every opportunity to learn.
6. Be loyal, but not blindly so, when it comes to equipment dealers.
7. Focus on training your staff well.
8. Develop a strong portfolio – show and tell about the problems you faced and how you solved them.
9. Hire people that balance your traits – if bookkeeping isn't your bag, hire an assistant that loves numbers.
10. Learn more Spanish.
11. Step back and look at how your course fits into the market mix of your area. Hone the features on the course to attract more golfers.
12. Find your niche.
13. Be confident but not arrogant.
14. Don't become close friends with individuals at your private club. Politics has doomed many good superintendents.
15. Use more than one vendor for purchases if possible.
16. Like what you're doing.
17. Don't hold grudges against coworkers. Professionals can get along with anyone.
18. Be patient.
19. Weigh the higher salary of private clubs against the better retirement at most municipal courses.
20. If you need help, ask for it.

Source: Golf Course Industry research

