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GRUMPY OLD FARTS

Your honor – and ladies and gentlemen of the jury – I stand here before you prepared to plead guilty to four counts of being a grumpy old fart. Allow me to present the evidence for my own conviction for the offense.

First, as I age, I find myself increasingly unwilling to embrace new ideas. The last really new concept I thought was cool was Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" Strategic Defense Initiative. That turned out well, didn't it?

Second, my sense of fashion ceased to exist in about 1985. My closet is a tribute to preppyism. It contains hanger after hanger filled with blue blazers, boring striped ties, white button-down shirts and a dozen pairs of khakis. To my credit, I don't own those ultimate preppy status symbols: madras plaid Bermuda shorts and penny loafers.

Third, the books I read these days tend to be exclusively about old, dead white guys. Innovative new fiction? Bah! Instead, biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain, Harry Truman and Albert Einstein fill my bookshelf. I'm a big believer in learning from the experiences of those who've been long moldering in the grave. For me, "deceased" automatically equals "smart."

Finally ... modern music? If I had an iPod, I'd be busy trying to figure out how to digitize and transfer my good old vinyl LPs by Frank Sinatra, James Brown, The Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles onto it. Sue me, but I like that scratchy old sound. It takes me back to being a pimply-faced, hormone-driven teenager necking with my girlfriend in a dark basement.

So, as I wrestle with the onset of my grumpy old fartism, I began to ponder the meaning of what it means to be a "young buck" versus being "a cagey old veteran" in the superintendent profession. Here are a few observations:

A wise man once said young superintendents make their reputation by spending money while old superintendents keep

theirs by saving money. That might be true as a general rule – particularly at higher-end private clubs that get rid of a veteran and hire a young guy with new, exciting ideas. Yet it sounds like a corollary to the cliché that a conservative is a liberal who's been through an IRS audit. The bottom line is that experience teaches us patience and caution. The question is whether it teaches you when to be selectively aggressive as well.

A track record is exactly that: a list of wins and losses. No one – and I mean no one – goes through 20 or 30 years in this business without making mistakes or being perceived as making mistakes. A young gun is simply a veteran who hasn't yet had the opportunity to screw up royally.

To facilities – don't let a handful of loudmouths force you into a bad decision about a veteran superintendent.

That said, knowledge is collective and grows throughout time. The good young bucks have listened and learned carefully from the grizzled old bastards who've already made those mistakes. In contrast, the not-so-good-young bucks think they know it all because of a piece of paper from a turf school and an internship at Augusta National, Olympic or Pine Valley. Nice credentials, but it won't guarantee you a six-figure salary and the respect of your peers.

On the other hand, there are old guys who've simply stopped learning and trying new things. They get too settled and too comfortable and make the almost always fatal mistake of forgetting whose golf course it really is or by living by the mantra of, "That's the way we've always done it." I don't mean that you don't take the required classes and attend seminars. I mean you

forget to listen and embrace what you hear. There are too many new research studies, agronomic ideas and techniques constantly being generated that you can't afford not to hear and seriously consider them.

I'm guessing, but I'd estimate there's about a 50/50 success rate for the facilities that choose to dump the old guy for the young guy. I don't blame the club, the old guy or the young guy for the situation. It simply happens, like a big pile-up at a dangerous intersection. Politics at the facility change. Old guys get too cozy. Young guys get antsy and figure they're ready for the big job. Like those car accidents, it's usually a "no-fault" situation.

So here's my advice to all parties involved:

To facilities – don't let a handful of loudmouths force you into a bad decision about a veteran superintendent. That old guy's steady hand might be the key factor that keeps the other 90 percent of members or players happy. He might also be the person who saves the golf course when something weird or unexpected happens. Experience matters when push comes to shove.

To the young guys – you know a lot, but admit to yourself that you have so much to learn. You might not think you'll be in your current job forever, but the only thing in life that's certain – besides death and taxes – is your reputation. Protect it like it's a newborn baby.

To the old guys – never, ever get so comfortable that you lose track of the priorities that got you the job in the first place. It's easy just to manage the day-to-day, but don't give up that keen focus on member satisfaction, appeal to public players and that "something new" that commands the customer's attention. If you're resting on your laurels, you lose. You may be an old fart, but you can't afford to be an old thinker.

Maybe it's because I'm a grumpy old fart myself that I tend to be more sympathetic to the folks who have been there and done that ... as long as they don't forget what made them be there and do it in the first place. You can survive, as long as you always think young but act old. **GCI**