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## THE WALKABLE WALK

*(The following commentary relates directly to private club employment, somewhat to daily-fee employment, but not to municipal employment.)*

In my 25-plus-year career, I haven't seen a situation where so little has been done to address a serious ill that affects so many. Enough! It's time to drive the "lack of written contracts" demon from the ranks of golf course superintendents. It's time to walk the walkable walk.

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

To understand this issue, the following question must first be asked and answered: Why are so many golf course superintendents being denied written contracts when virtually every one else in golf is granted this privilege? The answer is simply one of risk management on the part of club employers. Search committee duty is looked at as a short-term, plum assignment that provides the visible opportunity for members to serve their clubs and enhance their peer status throughout the membership, provided there will be no bad hires to embarrass search-committee members.

The fear level of a bad hire is what drives the decision process relative to who gets a written contract or not. For example, because there's little risk of a bad hire when engaging a qualified golf professional, the profession enjoys the benefits of written contracts.

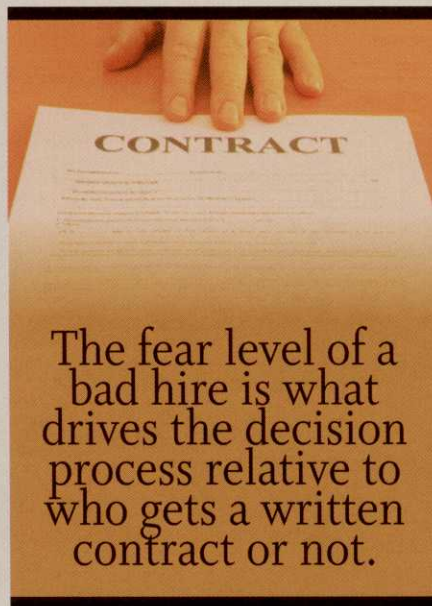
The risk element begins to surface somewhat when hiring a general manager because bad food and staffing can bring down a general manager. But because problems of this kind can be rectified rather quickly, i.e., replace the chef or pool manager, etc., engaging a general manager generally is looked at as a low-risk hire that can justify a written contract.

On the other hand, hiring a golf course superintendent is looked at as the highest employment risk possible throughout operational golf because search commit-

tees – generally not readily able to identify with the technical nature of golf course maintenance practices – don't interview candidates effectively and turf management problems tend to be long lasting.

### LEARNING TO WALK THE WALK

Clearly, if any headway is going to be made on the written contract front, it must be based on the dual premises of minimizing the risk of bad hires, while at the same time educating the national golf community to the fact that golf course superintendents are being denied written contracts unjustifiably. This theme should play well with club



committees and members throughout golf because these same people enjoy the privilege of a written employment agreement themselves or they grant such to people they employ. Therefore, while this battle appears to be winnable, victory can't be presumed and will be realized only after the issue is debated effectively on the following three fronts:

**The superintendent front.** Once offered a job and told a written contract wouldn't be

available, a superintendent should continue to negotiate with search committees in a nonconfrontational manner. Suggest that after the completion of a satisfactory first year of employment the club would guarantee four months of severance pay through the second year of employment. Then, repeat this procedure for each of the next two years of successful employment, advancing the severance guarantee in steps each year from four to eight to a cap of 12 months going into the fourth year of employment where the superintendent then would be granted a multiyear, written contract. Clearly, the superintendent will have to sell this approach early and effectively to succeed, but once this is done, success should follow because the risk has been taken out of hiring.

**The chapter front.** Because the GCSA chapters interact with the country's golf clubs more than any other outside entity, they should take advantage of this relationship to advance the opportunity for their members to seek and obtain written contracts. The key elements to developing this support would be that chapters (1) establish an employment relations committee to educate club search committees about the written contract issue and (2) hire a mature, business savvy, golf-experienced individual to serve as executive director and become the face of the chapter when interacting with club administrations. My next column (June) will expand on this concept in complete detail, including presenting a job description for a chapter executive director.

**The GCSAA front.** The GCSAA's role would be to use its magazine, Web site, marketing funds and access to national television spots to educate the national golf community to the inequities surrounding the written contract issue. A key factor would be noting that the one-year element is as damaging as the nonwritten element because this combination makes it difficult for otherwise eligible superintendents to establish credit.

Working in concert, golf course superintendents, their regional chapters and the GCSAA effectively can defuse this written contract issue within a few years. **GC**