



# No worries

Superintendents need to have a detailed plan in place to cover all bases in case of a crisis

By Steve and Suz Trusty

**W**hen it comes to crisis management, superintendents should be prepared, plan for the worst and hope it never happens. All businesses, including independently or municipally owned golf courses, should have a crisis plan in place. It should be broad-based, covering everything from financial crises to clubhouse incidents to on-course situations.

"If your course doesn't have a crisis plan, consider hiring a firm to develop the plan and train your employees to follow up on it," says Harvey Englander, president of Englander & Associates, a California-based public relations agency.

Targeted sections of a master crisis plan then can be pulled together into a more concise format to issue to key groups within a facility. For

superintendents and their crews, a plan should provide detailed actions, covering all potential crisis situations:

- Relatively minor detrimental changes in course playing conditions
- Natural disasters
- Semi-man-made natural disasters such as wild fires
- Water usage
- Environmental issues
- Property damage
- Personal injury
- Death.

#### THE BIG PICTURE

Managers should consider the full scope of an organization when setting up a crisis management

system. Ronald Luepke, golf course superintendent based at Charleston Springs Golf Course in Millstone, N.J., oversees three of seven 18-hole, public courses located at six different facilities within the 27 parks of the Monmouth County Park System. As a relatively large organization serving a large part of the general public, a crisis management plan is extremely important for Monmouth County.

"We're cognizant of how many visitors we put through these areas and have tried to anticipate all the things that could happen," Luepke says. "We've developed a detailed, step-by-step, park panic plan for handling these situations, covering everything from roadside safety to first aid."

The plan is printed out and compiled in a

binder that also contains the contact information of all supervisory employees. The binders are placed in an easily accessible spot at all facilities, and all employees know where they're kept, Luepke says.

"We also conduct extensive training for all our employees in these multiple situations each year, so that even if it's the first time an incident occurs, they're so familiar with the proper procedures they feel like they've handled it before," he says.

**DAMAGE CONTROL**

Crisis management includes communicating with various constituencies to get the superintendent's story out, gain control, provide assurance and eliminate any long-term repercussions.

"You can't be afraid of the facts or try to hide or minimize the situation," Englander says. "You have to tell people what you know and be honest about saying what you don't."

Craig Felton, superintendent at Oak Hills Country Club in San Antonio, suggests superintendents build their communication network in advance so they're well prepared for a crisis.

"Our current green chair and I talk three or four days a week," Felton says. "Usually, it's a quick phone call just checking in. Every week or two, we'll take the golf cart around the course looking at things together. He's comfortable with the level of communication, and because of that, the information flow works smoothly."

The more avenues superintendents pursue with communication the more people they're going to reach. They should have a plan in place to use all venues, post the information and hope for the best.

"You can ensure the information reaches everyone, but you can't make someone take in that information," Felton says. "It's just human nature for people to pay attention to the things they want to and ignore the rest. So unless there's a bad crisis, they tend to miss more than they absorb."

A set procedure for disseminating information that's followed consistently helps prevent missed messages. Felton posts detailed information on two easels – one at the entrance to the club and one in the golf shop. For a renovation project, for example, a notice would explain what the crew is going to do, what part of the course will be affected, when the work will take place, what to expect during the process and when it's completed.

"We also include the information in advance

**Tips for handling crises smoothly**

- Anticipate potential problems.
- Develop a detailed action plan.
- Train personnel.
- Be prepared with the plan and any equipment or supplies needed to carry it out.
- Get all the facts.
- Define the problem.
- Develop solutions.
- Bring in experts if needed.
- Be honest.
- Use all communication venues, and communicate early and often.
- Alleviate fears.
- Turn bad to good. Use the crisis to improve conditions.

in our newsletter, in the report from the green committee and on my golf course update board," Felton says.

For significant projects, such as a recent 10-week stint rebuilding all 63 bunkers, the green committee chair will send a letter to the membership. If the issue is dramatic, Felton will put the information on letterhead and place it on the golf shop counter so everyone who checks in will be exposed to it.

The Monmouth County Park System uses a similar system, posting notices in the pro shop, by the front door and on the counter where golfers can see them when they check in. Serious situations, such as a methane gas leak on a course built over an old landfill or an injured golfer or employee, require a greater outreach.

"You'll need to communicate your golf course is safe to the core constituency so golfers, employees and neighbors are assured they're not in danger of an explosion," Englander says about the gas leak example. "You'll also need to communicate with the appropriate government officials who are going to be concerned about the situation."

Additionally, superintendents shouldn't view the media as their enemies. They should be transparent with them, using them as a venue to spread messages.

"Consider establishing a relationship with a public relations firm to handle the major issues, preferably the firm that developed the plan and trained your employees," Englander says. "Keep them on retainer or negotiate alternate payment methods, such as reduced golf or a membership."

Englander recommends taking a creative approach to back up an assertion of safety in a situation such as a methane gas leak. One option is to hold a charitable golf tournament in conjunction with a nonprofit association well known in the community.

"You'll create good will and subtly deliver the message that if these key people play your course it must be safe," he says. "Whenever possible, use a crisis as an opportunity to improve

the situation and communicate those improvements, too."

**WORKING THE PLAN**

Crisis can be categorized in two groups: expected problems that are agronomically related and often can be avoided if a superintendent is on top of his game, and unexpected problems he can't control, such as vandalism or natural disasters. Crises related to a natural disaster are probably the easiest to communicate because everyone knows it occurred. People see the immediate impact of floods or wind storms in a larger area, so they understand damage at the course.

"But the effects of a severe drought are more difficult to communicate," Felton says. "If there are one or two decent rain events, they expect conditions to be back to normal."

Even more difficult to communicate are those agronomic situations that change conditions. An issue that might affect Oak Hills is the transition from *Poa trivialis* to bermudagrass on overseeded greens.

"Generally, we'll hit 90 degrees in early April, so the transition gradually takes place in early spring and makes little impact," Felton says. "In 2007, we didn't hit 90 until June and the *Poa trivialis* lingered until then. That year, the transition took place later and was much quicker. The members knew the greens looked and played differently all of a sudden, but they didn't know why. That's when it's vital to use all communication avenues to keep them informed."

Some agronomic situations require extensive renovation and need an ongoing flow of information. Luepke had problems with one of Monmouth County's greens the second year after construction of a new course.

"I should've known there was too much shade to grow grass successfully, but I'd opted to push the window in favor of the aesthetics during the design and construction process," he says. "I had to be brutally honest, first with myself in acknowledging the situation, and then in bringing it to my supervisor. I explained the problem, took responsibility for why it had

happened and presented the solution, removing about 26 more trees to get additional light and air movement to the green.”

Because Luepke had been honest and upfront, the park system accepted what he said and allowed him to proceed with the project. He used the park system’s standard communication channels to alert the golfers and continually updated the information.

“Our proactive approach eliminated negative feedback because the majority of the players were more interested in better turf conditions on the green,” he says. “That was seven years

ago, and we’ve had no further problems with the green. In retrospect, I’d have opted for playability over aesthetics, removing those trees during construction.”

For unexpected crises, quick reaction is essential. Luepke recounts a vandalism incident with the trail of destruction starting in the bentgrass nursery near the maintenance facility. Vandals destroyed a weather station, then proceeded to the nearest hole where they demolished a water cooler stand, ball washer and tee marker. They broke the flagstick at the next tee and put graffiti on the 15th green. Luepke’s

crew called him when they pulled in and spotted the damage.

“When I arrived, we assessed the damage and called the police,” he says.

Footprints in the dew led them to the culprits who confessed, and court-ordered restitution was paid. Luepke’s crew set up a temporary water cooler, cleaned up and repaired on the green immediately after the police collected the evidence they needed. They posted notices explaining the situation and stayed open for play. Damage repair in out-of-play areas was worked into the crew’s schedule. **GCI**



## CRISIS CASE STUDY: GREENS PROBLEMS

**M**edia focus can put crisis situations in the spotlight. Such was the case for Ralph Kepple, CGCS, at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta. As the facility prepared to host the FedEx Cup Tour Championship Sept. 13 to 16, 2007, problems with the greens were documented and analyzed worldwide.

Heat-related problems were anticipated because the event was moved from late October/early November to September. For eight straight days, the club experienced temperatures warmer than 100 degrees and temperatures in the upper 70s to low 80s at night. The weather produced high soil temperatures that affected the bentgrass negatively. To make matters worse, golfers wanted to play the course before the tournament.

Kepple monitored conditions closely, but the heat limited his treatment options.

“Even hitting every green at no less than 30-minute intervals with a quick syringe produced minimal results because the water from our irrigation pond was so warm,” he says.

Kepple met with Cal Roth of the PGA Tour and the club’s general manager to discuss alternatives. One decision was to halt play two weeks before the tournament.

“We brought in a truckload of ice to soak the greens with all night,” Kepple says. “About three hours into that process, a big thunderstorm with cool rain hit, accomplishing much more than we could have.”

Early the next week, the daytime temperatures dropped into the low to mid-90s, though nights were still in the mid-70s.

On Sunday, Sept. 9, the final day of the BMW Championship, the PGA Tour put a letter in all the players’ lockers stating the greens at East Lake were damaged and they wouldn’t be allowed on them during practice rounds. Many players became upset and made comments that quickly

spread through the media and were embellished through the process. That weekend the heat spell broke, and things turned around quickly.

“Six- to eight-foot sections around the edges of the four worst greens were completely dead,” Kepple says. “We harvested collar-height bermudagrass from another part of the course to create a wide collar on three of the greens. On the fourth, we resodded the section with bentgrass harvested from our sod nursery. Both methods worked well.”

Players started arriving Monday, Sept. 10, and by then, they could play on all but three of the worst greens. Conditions were so much better than they had expected. In the meantime, Kepple sought the media.

“I was able to explain what happened, why it happened and what we had done, correcting some of the inaccuracies that were circulating,” he says. “Had I been able to connect with a couple people from the Golf Channel on Monday, it would have reduced the negative coverage.”

By the start of the tournament, the greens weren’t a factor.

“The damage to the root system left us with soft greens, but they putted true,” Kepple says. “Though the ball bounced as it rolled, it held the line. The greens were much slower than we had planned, but still adequate. The players were able to dial in the difference.”

For Kepple, the dilemma was determining the critical communication point. During the PGA Tour’s visit in July, the agronomist noted the greens were the best they’d ever been. But the heat changed that, and though breaks in the temperature were predicted week after week, they failed to occur.

“In retrospect, I’d have communicated with my general manager earlier, when I saw there was a possibility of a problem,” Kepple says. “We could’ve discussed solution alternatives and maybe limited the play sooner. Because he didn’t know what was occurring, there was no opportunity for him to help.” **GCI**