

COPACETIC CREWS

Superintendents need good people skills to manage staffs effectively

BY DAVID MCPHERSON



Part Dr. Phil, part turf doctor, golf course superintendents are more than just keepers of the green. As leaders of large crews, good people skills are just as essential as agronomic expertise.

"I'm not just growing grass," says Brian Netz, superintendent at Presidio Golf Course in San Francisco. "I'm growing people who will move on and be successful in whatever they choose."

So, how do superintendents succeed at "growing" good crews and earning their respect? It's all about knowing how to treat people and recognizing the human capital that maintains the course, Netz says.

"I tell my staff I could get monkeys to do most of the jobs out here and pay them bananas, but I want people who will think about what they're doing and will make more good decisions than bad decisions," he says. "I've been lucky always being able to surround myself with quality people who feel about the golf course like I do. It's more than a paycheck ... it's a labor of love and a reflection of who we are."

Netz's enthusiasm rubs off on others.

"I always try to point out when people are doing things right, and I try to do it in front of the entire staff," he says. "I make sure my staff knows I'm here to help them succeed as contributing members to the world. I've helped them through credit woes, alcohol addiction, immigration issues, etc. We spend more than nine hours together each day, so we're a family."

On average, a superintendent manages a staff of 21 or more people, according to GCSAA's most recent compensation and benefits survey. Many are seasonal part-time workers, while a few, such as head mechanics and first and second assistants, are full time. Workers range from teenagers to retirees and come from various socioeconomic backgrounds, so superintendents need to be sensitive to these differences.

In many ways, the skills required to be a successful leader in the golf course industry are no different than leading employees in an office setting. Many of the same management 101 skills apply. A superintendent must motivate and gain workers' respect through listening, communicating, empowering and rewarding.

PEOPLE SKILLS

Jim Husting, CGCS, at the private, 27-hole Woodbridge Golf & Country Club in Woodbridge, Calif., agrees with Netz that managing people is the most challenging aspect of a superintendent's job.

"Other than outside forces you can't control, such as budgets and wages, the biggest challenge to motivate your crew is managing personality conflicts," Husting says. "It's almost impossible to think when you get 17 people together they're all going to get along."

Husting jokingly says he should've taken more psychology classes in college.

"You're part referee and part psychologist," he says. "People

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have personal matters that follow them to work, whether it's divorce, health problems or other family matters. You have to be a good listener. When someone is feeling down, you need to ask him what's going on and listen. When they're having family problems, give them time off to be with their family ... the golf course will still be there."

Another key to motivating a crew is leading by example, says Shane Wright, CGCS, at Vero Beach (Fla.) Country Club.

"You can't expect them to work hard if you're only working 20 hours a week," Wright says. "When the crew knows you're willing to sacrifice to make the course the best it can be, they'll follow suit."

One of the biggest sacrifices any crew member has to make is his sleep – getting up before sunrise is half the battle.

"It's not easy to motivate 40 people at 5:30 a.m.," says Scott Bowman, golf course superintendent at Glen Abbey Golf Club in Oakville, Ontario, host of the 2008 RBC Canadian Open. "I tell them as long as you can get here by 5:30 a.m., the rest is easy."

Bowman agrees with Wright that leading by example is a proven way to inspire workers right from the moment a superintendent arrives.

"I like to be out there and work hard with the



Scott Bowman's leadership and ability to motivate his crew were crucial to the success of last year's PGA Tour event, held at Glen Abbey. The week of the Canadian Open, Mother Nature dumped 9 inches of rain on the course.

staff," he says. "I try to be here every morning before they are. If they see the boss is here on time every morning ... for the younger crew, that's half the battle. I try to be here 45 minutes before start time and open the shop up. If they see you doing that, they see you're focused on your end of the job as well, so it makes them get into it."

Bowman also tries to spend a little time with every employee. He may stop to ask one of the older fairway cutters how he's doing or ask one of the university students how his weekend was. He also may jump in a bunker or two with the crew.

"For them, to see a boss jump in and rake a bunker ... that goes a long way," he says.

Bowman's leadership and ability to motivate his crew were crucial to the success of last year's PGA Tour event, held at Glen Abbey. The week of the Canadian Open, Mother Nature dumped 9 inches of rain on the course. Without the dedication and teamwork of his regular crew of 40, plus an additional 20 volunteers, Bowman says the event would have been a flop.

A LITTLE REWARD GOES A LONG WAY

Recognition also goes a long way to gaining respect from crew members. Bowman doesn't believe in employee-of-the-month programs but emphasizes the importance of praise. He likes to treat everyone equally.

"I try to paint everybody with the same brush as far as staff events and recognition," he says. "Obviously, there are people who step up and go above other employees, but I try to give that recognition personally. All my incentives – staff barbecues, staff functions – I include everybody from high school students to the second assistant to the retired fairway cutter. That goes a long way because everyone sees they're on the same page."

Husting agrees with Bowman that recognition is paramount and helps gain more respect from a crew.

"They need to be recognized for the work they do," he says. "Some of the tasks are repetitive and menial, but they want to be praised as much as possible. I find verbal praise helps a lot."

Husting says Woodbridge hosts an annual salsa contest, complete with judges, which is a fun event his staff enjoys. Throughout the season, Husting also has departmental barbecues and an employee day where staff from all departments can play golf, swim and partake in other contests.

Phil Scully, golf course superintendent at the Granite Golf Club, a private course just north of Toronto says extracurricular activities – staff appreciation days or nights – are great ways to keep his team motivated, whether it's going bowling, playing paintball or the annual staff golf tournament in August.

"We shut the course down," he says. "Members aren't allowed on the property and senior staff from the Granite Club downtown come up and cook the meal. Many of my staff never go in the clubhouse because it is just for members, so this is their one time to go in there and be treated like a member."

SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

At Presidio, Netz employs mainly Hispanics, so he speaks fluent conversational Spanish to relate better.

"I understand the language nuances and their inflections," he says. "I can automatically use phrases they can readily identify with, and this creates a greater level of understanding."

While literally speaking a crew's language isn't always immediately possible, what's more important is finding common conversation and making time to connect on a more personal level.

TIPS FOR EARNING YOUR CREW'S RESPECT

- Reward and recognize
- Be visible
- Treat others as you would like to be treated
- Treat every employee equally
- Be a good listener
- Set a good example
- Make them feel part of the big picture
- Let them make decisions and make mistakes, empower them
- Be flexible
- Communicate and have regular meetings
- Have fun

Avoid:

- Playing favorites
- Disciplining in public
- Acting like you're above the crew

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"Young kids like to see a boss who's human," Bowman says. "I like to talk to everyone in the morning. It doesn't have to be business related. It could be something that happened in the news. Just because I'm the superintendent doesn't mean I'm above and beyond."

Being a superintendent doesn't mean one's perfect.

"Everybody makes mistakes, myself included," Bowman says.

Husting shares what he learned from a memorable mistake he made early in his career.

"The one mistake I will never make again is to promote a staff member to assistant superintendent," he says. "There was a lot of resentment toward me and the individual promoted. That person was a member of the crew, a 'buddy-buddy' type thing, and then he was telling his 'buddies' what to do. It was a no-win situation. Since then, I've always gone outside and brought someone in."



Without the dedication and teamwork of a regular crew of 40, plus an additional 20 volunteers, the Canadian Open would have been a flop.

THE BIG PICTURE

Scully believes it's essential to make employees aware of the bigger picture, another factor that helps motivate staff. Every new season, the Granite Golf Club begins with a staff orientation, but it's not just for Scully's team. Rather, it's conducted over the course of three days each April by the human resources department for all new hires. This way everyone gets to see how the whole staff works together as a team.

"I've always said to my staff the reason I got into this business was because I hate assembly-line mentalities ... just doing a job for the sake of doing a job," Scully says. "What I try to instill in my staff is the big picture. You aren't just

cutting grass. You aren't just raking a bunker. What's the big picture?"

One of those moments of truth comes down to what members and guests see when they come onto the property, Scully says.

"I empower my staff to make them feel they're directly responsible for how great this property is," he says. "It has nothing to do with me. I'm just the one who puts all the puzzle pieces together. They're the ones who go out and do all the work every day, and they're the ones members appreciate and love." **GCI**

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