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TALKING SHOP

The Michigan Assistant Superintendent Committee has been organizing assistant shop talks for a couple of years. These gatherings are a great way to engage assistants. Assistant shop talks can be simple to plan and execute and cost little or no money. Here are some of the ways we go about organizing them.

Organizing an assistant shop talk begins with finding a host maintenance facility. It could be your own course or another one down the road. The success with the assistant shoptalk begins by having the full support of the host golf course superintendent. Once the host facility is determined, establish a time and date that's convenient for the host facility. I've found the most success with shop talks running from 4 to 6 p.m. These hours allow plenty of time for assistants to work a full day and still be able to attend an event. It also allows assistants to be home at a good time.

The next item to consider is the agenda. The topics can be technical or non-technical in nature or something that's a trend. One recent shop talk we held included learning about a bunker renovation from beginning to end; many of them include talks on leadership, communication and daily tasks like irrigation, chemical management and staff management. Remember, all shop talks should include a tour of the maintenance facility and meeting the golf course superintendent. Most superintendents are happy to do a small presentation on any topic from a recent construction project to sharing interviewing tips and resume-building skills.

Talk to your local association or chapter president and ask them for help in sending out e-mails to the assistant members advertising the shop talk. I'd suggest sending out an e-mail about four weeks in advance to allow assistants plenty of time to manage their work and personal schedules. Always include a deadline for registration, which is important to finalize your number of attendees so you can plan for refreshments.

Using a core of assistant volunteers can help make your shop talk run smoothly. For example, to ensure good attendance, ask a group of assistants (possibly those on the chapter's assistants' committee) to divide

up a phone list of prospective attendees and make calls to personally invite assistants to the event. Don't worry about not getting a huge turnout the first time. Whether you get 12 or 30 assistants participating in the event, there's still something to learn.

The budget is nothing to worry about. I've yet to ask for money from our association for any of the shop talks I've organized. The superintendents I've worked with all have been very excited and happy about opening up their facilities and have volunteered to purchase pizza and pop. Once word got around, a subsequent shop talk was sponsored by a local industry vendor.

At the event, create a sign-in sheet and name tags. It's nice for assistants participating in the shop talk to be able to meet other assistants and immediately see their names and what courses they're from. A sign-in sheet will prove useful if you plan to organize another shop talk. You also can use it to send an e-mail thanking attendees.

Allow the host assistant the opportunity to chair the shop talk and give an introduction. This is a great opportunity for the host assistant to show off his facility and practice communication and leadership skills.

I've also found that it's good to have a few assistants in the crowd who are prepared to ask questions and initiate discussion should things get quiet. But trust me, there's always enough to talk about and the two hours goes before you know it.

Bring a camera and take notes. You never know what you might see and want to discuss with your own superintendent back at work. Take pictures and share them with your employer the next day. The pictures also can be used to prepare an article for your chapter's magazine or Web site.

When the event is over always thank the host superintendent and assistants for taking time out of their busy schedules to organize and host an assistant shop talk. Always follow up with a handwritten note.

A successful workshop takes planning, but it's worth it. Organizing assistant shop talks is about creating an opportunity for assistants to get together in a familiar environment that promotes networking and learning opportunities. **GCI**

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