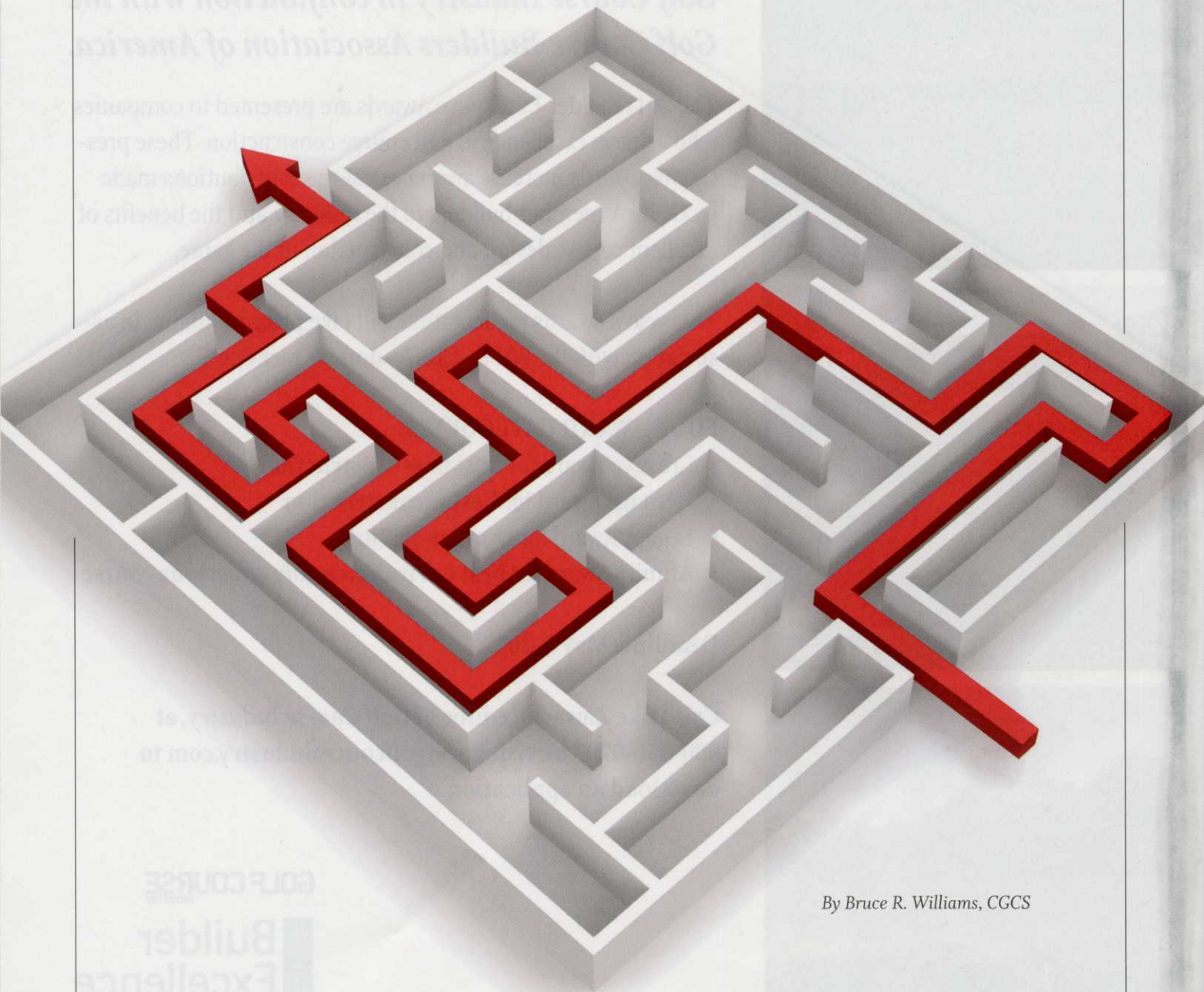


# Maneuvering through **CLUB POLITICS**

Just like greenkeeping, politics is an art and a science. And regardless of the type of course, understanding the ins-and-outs of your facility is essential to your long-term employment and career success.



*By Bruce R. Williams, CGCS*

# A Game Changer

**T**here are a number of classes that could be added to golf course superintendents' curriculum during their college years. You can't learn everything in college and some things must be taught through practical experience. Understanding the politics of a golf club or facility is essential to long-term employment and success at any golf course.

Just like greenkeeping, politics is an art and a science. It is concerned with the guiding or influencing of policy at any given golf facility. The science part is the political organizational chart that describes the hierarchy in a "perfect" setting. We all know that seldom does that perfect setting exist and there are a lot of variables and pressures that come from outside of the formal hierarchy.

People are passionate about their clubs and that is why they belong to them. Many well-meaning people want nothing but the best. If we channel that passion and energy into developing positive programs, practices and budgets that will accomplish the goals of the club, then we can successfully navigate the political waters of private golf clubs.

## THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

While there are many governance structures it is most common, in private clubs, to have a board of directors and a committee system. There may or may not be a general manager or director of golf but they all play into the governance equation and reporting structure. A typical private golf club would have a board comprised of nine individuals with three to four officers and the remaining board members being directors. Green committees are most often chaired by a board member and are comprised of a cross section of the club's golfing members. This should include both the men and women of the club and all levels of playing skill.

In most scenarios of private clubs the members are equity owners of the club. Membership may vary from 250-750 members for an 18-hole golf course. It is important to remember that each and every one of those members is an owner. While they may have no official authority over the golf course superintendent they surely have influence as a shareholder in the business. Some may have more influence than others and it is important to understand who the movers and shakers are in any club. Every club seems to have a handful of members who can and do exert influence over the elected board and appointed committees.

Never underestimate the influence of any one individual at your facility. It is important to treat all members as though they could be your boss in the future. I had a summer job at a very nice private club while I was in college. The golf course was surrounded by homes and many of them were residences of club members. Just outside of one property line there was a tee that each weekend would be littered by empty beverage cans and such. I suggested to the golf course superintendent that we speak to the father (a club member) of the kids who were having a party and littering each weekend. The superintendent told me to take 5 minutes and clean it up. He followed that comment

with "If you plan on staying at a club for 20 years or more that kid could eventually become your green chairman and he won't forget." I surely never forgot that lesson in club politics and I have always tried to treat every member as though they might eventually be the person I report to.

Everyone that plays golf has an idea of how they want their golf course to look and play. Seldom do you see agreement throughout an entire club. That is why we have the structure of the governance hierarchy. When the system works properly then members and their spouses provide input to the green committee. Green committees make recommendations to the board and they do not set policy. Boards set policy and ideally provide the funding to accomplish the desired look and playing conditions that the members want and can afford.

Once again this is a perfect scenario and seldom does this happen.

## TAKE AWAY TIPS

Here a couple of key components to best deal with club politics. Many of these were shared with me by mentors and friends and I know more than a few that will apply to make you more successful.

**Know the influential people that have no official authority but have significant impact on club operations as "when they talk everybody listens."**

**Communicate often and effectively as to the programs and plans for the golf course.**

**Know and understand the elected and appointed officials at your club.**

In a club that has divided opinions over projects and direction make sure not to hitch your horse to the wrong wagon.

**Know what the majority of the members want via formal or informal surveys.**

**Treat every member and their families as though they could be your next boss.**

Board and committee members want the best value they can have and it is up to the superintendent to develop the plans to provide the best product they can afford.

**The golf course belongs to the members and while superintendents have pride in the course they need to understand that the golf course is not theirs.**

No two clubs are the same.

**All politics are local.**

It is important to remember that **each and every one of those members is an owner**. While they may have no official authority over the golf course superintendent they surely have influence as a shareholder in the business.”

There are many agendas at most clubs. Some want the course firm and fast while others prefer it to be green and lush. Some members want U.S. Open conditions daily and anything less is unacceptable. It is the responsibility of the green committee to filter the many thoughts of club members and work with the golf course superintendent to develop appropriate maintenance standards and long range plans to achieve the goals of the membership.

#### FEEDBACK

One of the best ways to gauge the desires of the membership is to conduct a survey. Some clubs do this internally and may have the right team to develop the appropriate questions. In my experience it has been preferable to use consultants that understand the business to develop the survey. Consultants like McMahon Group utilize a survey that not only looks at the golf course but at the entire club operation as well. The typical questions are asked regarding levels of conditioning but more importantly prioritization of those items and the means to pay for them.

Part of the politics in a club is gaining consensus on conditioning of the golf course. There are several ways to manage the process. In this economy many facilities have had to cut back their budgets resulting in reduced staffing and resources. To a point, efficiencies can be created that will have little impact on the long term protection of the asset -- namely the golf course. Successful golf course superintendents need to work through the green and finance committees to develop plans that will be affordable and accomplish the goals of the majority of the membership. Telling the membership what they should do is a big mistake. While they value your input they surely want to learn more about their options and what it takes to provide conditioning at various levels they can afford. Never forget that it is not your golf course -- it belongs to the membership.

#### STANDARDS

With recent budget and staff cuts it is important for clubs to go back and analyze their written maintenance standards and make sure the standards are in line with the expenses. Even in a good economy when standards change then resources must reflect that change as well.

A major dilemma at many clubs is a lack of alignment of budgets to standards. The worst case scenario is when a club wants to raise their conditioning standards while decreasing their manpower and overall budget.

#### COMMUNICATION

One of the biggest components of club politics is communication. Golf course superintendents need to spend a fair amount of time developing plans and alternatives in a changing golf business environment. I have worked with clubs to provide them alternatives for 10-to 30-percent budget reductions. The political part of the equation is educating and

communicating the effect of those cost reductions. Clubs do not have to give up great conditions on their greens and main playing surfaces but the periphery might not be as detailed as what members had been accustomed to. This concept needs to be supported by the committees, the board and eventually the entire membership. If it is not then people will think the superintendent is not doing his or her job.

Years ago most information regarding the golf course was shared with the green committee members and occasionally the board of directors. Today that would be a recipe for disaster. Club members play a lot of other golf courses and are constantly comparing their course to others they play. Often times this is done without knowledge of staffing levels and other resources to provide those conditions. There are many variables that go into golf course conditions that would include: soil types, irrigation system, grass types, drainage and equipment provided.

Golf course superintendents are most effective when they spend the time to communicate with as many members as possible and educate them on the business side of golf course management. Today this can be done through blogs, email updates, newsletters, town hall meetings and overall interaction with the membership. Each and every year new members join the club and new faces appear on the committee and the board. No two people are alike and an intuitive superintendent finds out quickly the best way to deal with the many personalities in the governance structure. Some people like lengthy detailed information while others like a short summary. Be sure to understand that your communications are both what the leaders want and in a form they are most likely to absorb.

When I think of the superintendents that have been employed by their clubs for a quarter of a century or more I find that the common denominator is their ability to understand their membership, communicate clearly to them and provide golf course conditions that are acceptable by the majority of the membership. They have learned how to manage club politics in a most effective way. **GCI**

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