



By Bob Lohmann

A club manager's guide to superintendent speak

There's an advertisement running on national television from one of the telecommunications companies where a young man, presumably of Italian descent, has gone back to the old country to explore his roots. He's standing on the street in some small town trying to communicate with an older gentleman. He speaks into what looks like a phone, "My grandfather was born in this village," or something like that. The phone magically translates the sentence into Italian and the old fellow breaks into a big welcoming grin.

I have no idea if this technology actually exists, or if this ad just hints at some capability that phones will someday have. But it struck me and several of us here in the office as something that, with a little tweaking, could be really useful.

For example, what if the phone featured the capability to translate not just what we say, but what we really mean? This gizmo would have a million and one uses, with our sons for example (On prom night we'd say, "You be careful tonight," into the phone, which provides a translated version of what we really mean: "Don't get anyone pregnant!") – or maybe our spouses ("I can't believe we're getting into this again;" phone translation: "You're right, honey"). Now there's a smartphone we could use.

Board members, course owners, club managers and directors of golf could use them, too – perhaps to get a better understanding of what their superintendent is *really* trying to tell them.

We all know that superintendents look after the most important asset at any daily-fee facility or private club: the golf course itself. But the downside to this reality is, superintendents also preside over the most expensive asset, and, on occasion, they must argue for additions to what is already the largest budget item at any course facility.

This can make communication with the head pro, the owner or board, and the golfers themselves an extremely delicate exercise. Club managers and course owners want candor, but superintendents must be extremely politic in the way they handle certain issues. Speaking their minds might just put them in a real awkward position, might put the club in an awkward position.

I hope to dissect the communications issues we all encounter in trying to do our jobs, on and off the golf course. Let's assume that board members, course owners, club managers and directors of golf had one of these futuristic, translating smartphones for the superintendent to use – so that management types could understand what the super is *really* trying to tell them without having to actually say it.

SITUATION #1

Complaints about hole locations.

Longtime golfing members complain to the board that hole locations don't feature enough variety from week to week. They also hint that the greens seem slower than in years past. In turn, the general manager or the board goes to the superintendent with this grievance.

As architects, we see this situation all the time and, more often than not, a diplomatic superintendent will respond with something like this to the board, club manager or course owner: "Look, the greens are running as fast as they can – we're rolling and double-cutting because the members have made it clear they want them fast. But we have to be careful not to over-stress the greens, and we need to keep the pins where they are playable and where, eventually, the ball will stop rolling."

That's a reasonable response. But suppose the superintendent said this into one of these wonder phones. Here's the translation, what he really means: Listen, we're cutting these greens within a millimeter of their lives.

They're a ticking time bomb. At this rate, by mid-summer they'll roll like table tops because they'll be dead. And tell me how the greens can be slower when we're mowing at .08 of an inch? The greens aren't slower, we just have to use the flattest parts or you'll be 4-putting all day. If you want fast, consistent speeds and ample pin locations there's only one answer, that is to rebuild. Otherwise you better change your expectations.

Let's be real. That's a hard thing for a superintendent to say and it may not be what the higher-ups want to hear, but it's the truth. Basically, he's telling his superiors they've got to spend money or change their thinking to solve the problem – and it's a widespread problem we see all over the country.

This is part of the point I'm trying to make: Architects are uniquely qualified and positioned to serve as a superintendent's smartphone. We can say things more bluntly to management than they can, because our day-to-day survival doesn't depend on being quite so diplomatic. We've seen it all and, of course, we bring the perspective of having actually rebuilt and recontoured greens to accommodate modern green speeds.

SITUATION #2

The board takes a course maintenance tour and the superintendent gets grilled.

The board puts the superintendent on the spot about poor turf quality in an outer rough area, near the tree line. Here's how he responds, "Well, this is a popular place for carts to drive and soil around these trees is compacted. The turf also has to fight the tree roots for nutrients and drainage could be better. Maybe we can thin them out a bit and cut back the roots."

If he said this into the smartphone – hey, let's call it the Smarchitect Phone – here's what the translation would say: These trees

need to come down. It's a simple fact: You can't grow healthy turf without good sunlight or air circulation. The trees are compromising our maintenance standard, and quite frankly they ruin what could be a great hole. You have a thousand freakin' trees on this property, you won't even miss these, especially once the turf is healthy.

Okay, maybe we dial down the Smarchitect phone on the last part, but odds are 50-50 that these trees don't add a thing and do hurt the hole. Taking trees down is another expense, no doubt, and many golfers – especially private club golfers – have formed unnatural attachments to way too many trees. But the truth is, everyone – including the turf around said trees – would benefit from getting rid of them. If the super doesn't feel comfortable saying it, an architect can and will.

SITUATION #3 Golfers complain that the tees are beat up.

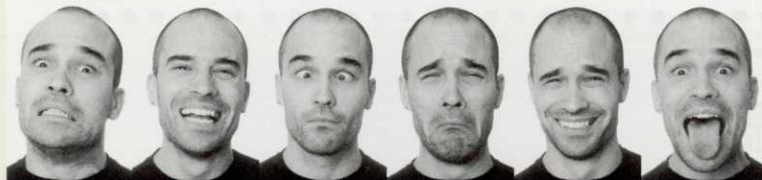
The superintendent is confronted with this complaint and says, "Well, we rotate the markers as much as we can in the given space, without going too far forward with the blue tees or too far back with the whites – and the senior men prefer to be back here, by the whites, rather than up by the reds. We've been trying to use the transition areas on off-days to give the main tee a rest without angering the members."

If the superintendent had been speaking into the Smarchitect phone, the translation could frankly go a number of ways: a) We need much larger tees and a dedicated set of senior tees; or b) Why the hell can't we put all the tees forward on certain days? What's wrong with some variety? Half the members who play the blues are way over their heads anyway, and isn't the PGA promoting "Play It Forward"? Why aren't we? or c) These tees are surrounded by trees 60 feet tall, they don't get sun till 1 p.m., and the trees block the use of the entire left half. Maybe the trees, not the tees, are the problem.

The politics of tee-marker placement is well known, especially in the private club sector. Golfers are creatures of habit, they get used to certain things and it's hard to introduce new ideas sometimes – like the simple movement forward of a tee to account for wind conditions on a given day, or the notion that money should be spent on tee expansion. We can understand why the superintendent is often reluctant to say so, especially in these trying economic times when every aspect of the day-to-day budget is being scrutinized.

But one way or another, these conversations have to take place. These wonder phones aren't on the market yet, so think about using a mediator like your friendly neighborhood golf course architect. Otherwise, maybe it's enough that board members, GMs and owners do a better job of listening to their superintendents – and reading better between the lines, especially in situations that sooner or later will require investment of some kind. Otherwise, it seems we're just kicking the can further down the road.

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Improve your conversations

If you're having trouble communicating or getting your point across with coworkers, superiors or customers, business coach and author Sharon Saylor says your nonverbal cues could be blocking your message.

"True communication goes beyond words, and great communicators use every tool they have to deliver their message," says Saylor. "When you have control of your nonverbal language, you can communicate confidence with passion, persuasion, credibility, and candor—factors that will help you soar above your competition in the business world."

Saylor provides some useful tips:

Don't fill the air with um, uh and you know.

It's natural to pause when you speak. What's not natural is to fill the silent pause with sounds.

Use hand gestures systematically. When we use only words to convey our message, we make it necessary for our audience to pay very close attention to what we say. Using gestures systematically, especially when giving directions or teaching, makes your audience less dependent on the verbal part of the presentation.

Don't put your hands in your pockets. Thumbs hanging off the pockets and hands deep in both pockets both say, "Geez, I hope you like me." Hands deep in the pockets jingling change say "Geez, I'm nervous and hope you like me," or, "Geez, I'm so bored. Is this ever going to be over?" Break this habit by being comfortable with your hands straight down by your sides – after all it is the natural place for them to be.

Don't cross your arms.

This stance is most frequently understood to indicate upset or discomfort. Some interpret it as, "I am not open to discussion," or, "I am annoyed."

Know when to put your hands on your hips. This is a ready-to-take-action gesture—think gunfight. It makes most people appear bigger, because they are actually taking up more space. Yet, it is often given negative labels by others, such as meaning you are annoyed, closed, or won't listen, similar to placing your arms across your chest.

Remember, the eyes have it. The eyes are the most expressive and really are the window to thoughts and emotions. Little or no eye contact is often thought to be associated with lying, lack of self-esteem or interest.

