

A superintendent's guide to club manager speak



By Dennis Lyon, CGCS

I am sure we have all walked out of our boss's office, either not fully understanding what was just said, or thinking we understood the conversation only to find out later we had it wrong.

The truth is many of the problems a superintendent encounters on the job relate to a lack of effective communication.

For the sake of this article, let's assume we have access to a gizmo which will interpret what club managers really mean. Let's call this gizmo a boss-ilorator. Let's assume in the situations below the boss-ilorator will interpret Club Manager Speak (CMS) and describe what our club managers really mean when they communicate with us.

SITUATION #1 Budget study.

The superintendent is called into the club manager's office and informed by the manager the club has decided to do a benchmark study on the maintenance budgets of comparable courses. The purpose of the study is to ensure this club's budget is not out of line.

Club Manager Speak (CMS) translation: Someone with a measure of power feels the maintenance budget is too high. There is a good chance your budget will be cut next year using this benchmark data as justification.

SITUATION #2 Scheduling.

The club manager asks the superintendent if the rough mowing schedule can be adjusted on Ladies' Day so the ladies won't complain about the mowers interrupting their event.

CMS translation: I am getting very weary of the ladies complaining about the rough mowers on their event days. Make this problem go away!

SITUATION #3 Personal appearances.

The club manager comes up to the superintendent on the putting green and says the pro told him he has not seen him up at the golf shop in quite a while. The manager says he wants to make sure everything is OK between

the superintendent and the golf professional.

CMS translation: When you were hired as the superintendent I made it clear you were expected to maintain good communications with the golf professional. I am concerned you are falling short in this area.

SITUATION #4 Corporate outings.

The club manager informs the superintendent that club board member Mr. Smith is hosting his corporate outing next week and is hoping golf course staff can polish the course up a little for this event. The manager goes on to say, he will check on the superintendent's progress later in the week.

CMS translation: Mr. Smith wants the course in as close as possible to "member guest" conditions by next week. I will be monitoring your progress on getting the course ready. Preparing for this event needs to be priority number one.

SITUATION #5 Construction.

The club manager tells the superintendent the board would like to rebuild the front nine bunkers next year but funds are going to be very tight.

CMS translation: Plan on rebuilding the front nine bunkers next year, in-house, using existing staff with a minimum budget.

SITUATION #6 Positive feedback.

The club manager comes down to the maintenance building to find the superintendent. He tells the superintendent he has had a lot of positive feedback on course conditions the past several weeks and wants to pass along the good word.

CMS translation: I have had a lot of good feedback on course conditions and want to let you know. Sometimes our bosses tell us exactly what they mean, no translation required.

In the real world we know the boss-ilorator does not exist.

Our bosses, including club managers, may at times try to be politically correct or sugar-

coat the message because they do not want to hurt our feelings or want to avoid conflict. As a result, they may use Club Manager Speak which can stand in the way of effective communication. Wouldn't the superintendent in situation #3 have been better off, if the club manager had been more direct and said he had a concern with the way the superintendent and the golf professional were communicating? Or in situation #4, if the club manager had clearly stated his expectations from the beginning on the corporate outing, wouldn't the superintendent have had a better chance of meeting the manager's expectations?

So how can superintendents better deal with club manager speak? Based on my years of experience, here are what I believe to be the keys to success:

- Listen intently to what is being said. Ask as many questions as necessary to ensure you fully understand the message.
- Don't be afraid to ask the "next question." This could be the question or situation your boss may be trying to avoid.
- Create a relationship of trust and openness with your club manager. Work to make effective communication a mutual priority.
- Your manager will be more likely to avoid CMS if you can accept bad news without becoming defensive. The goal is to communicate and fully understand the message. How you and the club manager deal with the message is another issue.

• Listen with empathy. It may be easier to understand the message if you look at the situation from the club manager's perspective.

• Remember that maintaining effective communication with your club manager or boss is the best way to avoid being surprised down the road.

Hopefully by using this superintendent's guide to club manager speak we will be able to more fully understand what our club managers really mean when they communicate with us. **GCI**

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