

# THE MOST WANTED

Want to go far in this industry? The traits, skills and talents every superintendent should possess to get to the top.

BY GARY GRIGG

**T**he things that will make you the most successful are the things you are the least prepared for coming out of school. You cannot create a leader in a classroom – it takes experience and good mentoring under successful managers. Few people have the natural sense of what it really means to work with other people.

First, let me tell you a little about myself. My 44-year journey through the golf course industry has been varied and very interesting. I have been involved in golf course maintenance, new-course construction, old-course reconstruction, renovation, hosting major tournaments, working in management companies, consulting and being a co-founder and principle of my own golf industry company.

I earned a BS in agriculture and entomology from Utah State University in 1964, and my MS in agronomy from Michigan State University in 1966. I accepted my first golf course superintendent's position in 1968 and retired from the golf course superintendent's profession to work on my own in 2000. I currently work as an agronomist and vice president of Grigg Brothers. During my journey I earned a CGCS from GCSAA and have maintained that certification for 35 years. I also earned a MG from BIGGA and have been certified there for 17 years. I've served on the GCSAA board of directors from 1989 to 1997 and served my term as president in 1995-96. I've spoken at a lot of turf conferences worldwide and I've taught agronomic seminars for GCSAA and private distributors across the USA, taught agronomy for Idaho State University for a year and I've authored numerous articles for professional industry publications.

I love my chosen profession. Someone once said, "It is not work if you love what you do." I strongly believe the more knowledgeable you are of all the many skills required to be a golf course superintendent, the better your chances of long-term career success. I want to spell out what those critical skills are and put them in some type of order with the understanding that, to reach the top, you must prepossess some or acquire all of them along the way.

## A person with sound agronomic skills

**I**t is believed you have agronomic skills when you are hired. Therefore, this is the one I will explore least.

Let me sum it up this way. To be a great golf course superintendent requires an advanced knowledge of agronomy. From my many years of travel and consulting with golf course superintendents, I believe agronomic skills are lacking in many of today's modern golf course superintendents. Many golf course programs in the schools or programs within turf schools are fast-tracked and don't have a good, solid agronomic curriculum.

A superintendent must be an expert in plant nutrition, plant pathology, entomology, soil science, weed control, thatch (causes and control), turfgrass varieties and irrigation techniques. I also believe a superintendent must stay abreast of new developments in all of these areas, as well. There is simply not enough room in a single magazine article to explore each of these subjects.

Most of us are maintaining a golf course to the satisfaction of a demanding clientele,

and we must conform to their demands as they own the course.

Never fear new technology. It comes along every day, but look at it in depth and ask for valid data from quality schools and good researchers that back up any salesperson's claim. Sales' claims without valid data are called marketing. Many folks are good at marketing, so make sure it is good science, too. Before you try anything new on your course do your own testing in practice or out-of-play areas.

Yes, agronomic training is important. However, there are other skills that successful, modern turf managers must all have in common.

## A PERSON WITH GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS



**A** person's greatest asset in this or any other business is his ability to communicate. The flow of communications must be both down and up the organizational chart of the club – management, staff, members and even the general public.

Be prepared to defend your profession and correct misconceptions whenever possible. Communicate with media and be an expert resource for them. Visit with members and attend club functions. Start a newsletter or a blog and be informative and proactive.

Good, effective and constant communication cannot be overemphasized. Mix-ups in communication are embarrassing for everyone. It's been my experience that most errors on the golf course are caused by improper communication. Most superintendents who lose their jobs don't lose them because they lack particular technical skills. Instead, they're let go because of a failure to communicate properly.

Remember, the responsibility for good communication always belongs to the person who possesses important information, whether this is the proper instruction of the maintenance staff or distributing vital data to the greens committee.

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## A person who can work effectively with people



**F**ew people have the natural sense of what it takes to work with other people.

The greatest interpersonal issue now confronting the golf course superintendent is working with people. In fact, management is all about dealing with people. You must select people, train people, organize people, inform people, control people and compensate people.

Dealing with people consists of three major areas: Working with a crew, interacting with people in other departments at your facility and communicating with members.

Most superintendents, myself included, rise through the ranks believing that the principal asset they have is their technical agronomic ability. As they move up, they soon find it takes much more than agronomics to be successful in this business.

All at once, it is the superintendent's or course manager's ability to get things done through other people that count most. The crew becomes the most important asset. You must get work done through them. Often, staff management is not taught in turf school, it is acquired from experience. Golf course staffs nowadays tend to be very diverse. Most of what I have learned, I learned by making mistakes. Believe me, some of my mistakes have been big mistakes.

Some things I have learned along the way:

- Don't be afraid to make mistakes. If you risk little, you will probably win little.
- Welcome ideas from your employees. Good ideas from the rank and file are a credit to you as well as to the originator. No superintendent worth his salt ever feels threatened by a good idea from a subordinate.
- Always keep your promises. Likewise, don't make promises you can't keep.
- Never underestimate your workers. Good ideas can come from humble sources.
- Fertile minds are not always labeled with a college degree.
- Learn to use "horse sense" in dealing with others. In other words, learn to treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Keep in touch with key members of your department. Don't shut yourself up in your office and don't depend upon assistants to do your legwork for you.

Interacting with people in other departments is nothing more than good communication. Other department heads at a club or facility are also professionals and they are important for the accomplishment of the superintendent's short-term and long-term goals. The superintendent is part of a business and he

needs to think about the implications of his work and how it affects the other departments of a club.

You must continually ask yourself: "Am I an answer to a problem or am I part of the problem?" The superintendent cannot become overly stressed or become too casual while interacting with the other professional staff at the club. The only thing that really counts is performance. Never make excuses – they only lower your professional standards and soften your character.

The better you become at effectively working with other people, the better your chance of long-term career success.

Lastly, effective leaders retain their key personnel, which is a critical skill. Empower employees to do their job and have an open-door policy with your employees. Communicate to each employee their role in your operation and have weekly meetings with all personnel under your supervision. Work together with your employees to solve all member, guest or maintenance problems as quickly as possible.

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## A PERSON WHO CAN MOTIVATE THEIR EMPLOYEES



The ability to motivate employees is often the difference between success and failure as a leader. The most common mistake leaders make is to believe all of their employees are motivated by the same thing.

People are motivated in a variety of different ways. There are five recognized ways that people are motivated and each way weighs differently in importance from person to person. Lastly, no one is inspired by only one source of motivation

1. Make it fun – The sheer enjoyment of their job. Create an enjoyable work atmosphere. Have fun.
2. Tangible incentives – pay, bonus or leave allowance. Tie bonuses and incentives to job performance. Non-monetary rewards work very well at times, also.
3. Personal achievement – This employee is self-driven to meet his own standards of job performance. They like challenging work and abhor menial tasks.
4. Goal-oriented – This employee works hard if he or she believes in the cause, but not at all if he or she doesn't. Communicate your vision and communicate your end goals.
5. Personal reputation – An employee motivated in this fashion is interested in preserving and enhancing his or her reputation among peers and supervisors. Provide public praise and recognition for good work.

## A PERSON WHO CAN PROPERLY PREPARE AND SELL HIS BUDGET



Budgeting and selling your budget may be the most important part of your job. Therefore, you must learn how to do a program-based budget. Here are 7 basic steps to establish a program budget:

1. A written maintenance (business) plan based on the standards policy
2. An organizational chart of your department
3. A staffing chart complete with job descriptions
4. A description of each category item in your budget
5. A spreadsheet chart. With category items down the left (X axis) and months across the top (Y axis).

## A person who can delegate effectively



Take a lesson from my many years of experience as a golf course superintendent: You will not be able to perform your job successfully by yourself alone. Make it easier for yourself by allowing those subordinate to you to bear the burden with you.

Delegate responsibility to subordinates. By doing so, you do three things:

1. You ease your own workload.
2. You train deserving workers for more important posts.
3. You groom a competent successor who is ready to step into your shoes when it's time for you to move up the ladder or when retirement comes.

Theodore Roosevelt once said: "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."



## A person who can plan, prepare and present projects.

Knowing the "why" of anything we do is as important to the success of a task as the "how." It provides you with a defined purpose for taking a particular course of action.

There are a lot of steps involved in planning, and the techniques vary. In my opinion there are four underlying major points:

1. Where do you want to go?
2. What does it take to get there?
3. Implement the decision.
4. Monitor the plan for feedback as you go.

Managers might often have to adapt due to inevitable changes. The key word is flexibility. If the superintendent knows where they want to go and a shift occurs along the way, they will still achieve it if they keep the original goal in mind.

For example, it is critical that you create a maintenance plan for your club. Anywhere else in the business world this is called a business plan. The purpose of a maintenance plan is to define the desired level of quality for the golf course and to serve as a document to support your budget. Most importantly, this plan needs to include a mission statement. Your maintenance plan should be program-oriented, detailing every program it will take to make the standards the team has set forward and you must reflect those programs in your budget and equate budget numbers to this plan. For example, build a greens program and put a price on the following needed programs for your budget: mowing, rolling, topdressing, aeration/cultivation, irrigation, fertilization, hole placement, soil amendments, disease control, insect control, weed control, drainage, seeding/sodding and anything else.

Price the programs needed for greens surrounds, fairways, tees, roughs, out-of-play areas, maintenance shop, office and landscape.

Another example is to establish written standards with buy-in from your management and/or ownership. Put together a small committee to help put the standards together. It should consist of a representative from ownership, membership and the golf department.

The standards, first and foremost, should detail how the golf course is to be maintained and to what level.

6. Capital equipment purchases
7. Capital or special improvement projects

The value of this plan is that when the budget is being reviewed by those who approve it, they need to fully understand that when cutting money from the budget, they are cutting programs. And if they cut or amend programs, then their stated and approved standards may not be met.

Upper management will find it more difficult to eliminate needed programs rather than just amending a dollar figure.

In the process of budget review the superintendent needs to be seen as an able manager of the club's money.

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## A GOOD ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARD

- Use IPM programs
- Monitor your records and keep track with documentation
- Properly calibrate your sprayer and spreader equipment
- Do your own self audit – on site – on a regular base and keep a log

Regulatory compliance issues include:

- Fuel storage and handling
- Chemical storage facilities
- Equipment wash area
- Occupational health and safety issues
- Sprayer cleaning process
- Disposal/Storage of pesticide containers
- Be an environmentalist and care for your resources
- Get involved in research
- Do you practice what you preach?
- Audubon International program
- Wildlife habitat

The image we must project as a profession is that we can provide quality golfing conditions while accepting the responsibility of being good stewards of the environment.

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## A person who is a skilled professional

It is all these skills that interact together and present the superintendent with an intangible, yet achievable, challenge. Collectively we have diversity in personalities and diversity in professionalism.

Think like a manager and make informed decisions based upon the basic management principles in conjunction with your agronomic skills and you will be met with success.

Believe me, golf courses today are looking for good, skilled business managers as well as solid, technical agronomic-minded turf heads.

Lastly, present a positive image constantly, work at it and dress professionally. Image does not happen by accident – promote yourself.

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## Bonus: A person who knows and plays the game well



Be competent in golf course set up and marking the course according to the rules of golf. Play and understand the game. More and more clubs are looking for good players.

I have emphasized people, time, budgets, planning and communications – all things you do not usually learn in turf school because agronomy was the focus of the curriculum.

For example, a good manager may plan several projects. For budget reasons or time constraints they may be forced to choose between the projects. If you are in the mind-set to think like a manager and make informed decisions based upon the basic management principles I've described in conjunction with agronomic skills, then you will enjoy success. Taking these principles into account will elevate a superintendent in the eyes of his golf course management team. Golf courses today are looking for good business managers as well as good technical trained or agronomic superintendents. Put it all together and you have a great course manager.

Lastly, it also helps to have a sense of humor and an unflappable personality. Why do I say that? Because most superintendents are control freaks – working in an uncontrollable environment. GCI

Gary Grigg, CGCS, is a veteran superintendent and current vice president and agronomist at Grigg Bros.

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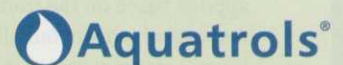
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