

LIKE A GOOD MENTOR

Mentoring great assistant superintendents is as much a skill as keeping your turfgrass disease free. Doing it well puts the future of the golf course industry in good hands.

BY JASON STAHL

Ken Mangum learned a lesson about managing people early on in his career. He was fresh out of college and gung ho on being the hardest worker on his golf course maintenance crew. In the morning, he would mow nine of the greens, while a co-worker would mow the other nine. He would routinely be done by 9 a.m., ready to start on something else, while the other guy wouldn't finish till 11 a.m.

"I talked to my boss about it because I thought it wasn't right," says Mangum. "He asked me what I would do with the guy, and I said I think I would have to fire him and hire someone else who could do a better job. He told me I should probably look a little deeper before doing that."

Turns out, the "other guy" couldn't read or write and could only operate a walking mower or a trimmer because he couldn't drive. But he never missed a single day of work and supplemented his minimum wage income by selling golf balls he found on the course.

"My boss said, 'He's one of the most dependable guys I have, and

you want to fire him?' I said, 'I think I'd like to reconsider,'" says Mangum.

The lesson Mangum learned? Not everyone is going to be a superstar, but everyone can contribute. Also, that learning how to deal with a variety of different people is key to success as a superintendent.

As director of golf courses and grounds at Atlanta Athletic Club with almost 40 years in the industry, Mangum has managed and mentored his share of people. And when it comes to mentoring assistant superintendents, he says the ideal "students" are those with a strong work ethic and a desire to learn.

"They can't come from a standpoint of, 'I already know it all,'" he says. "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."

Mangum believes it also pays for an assistant superintendent to be inquisitive and a believer in a better way of doing things.

"I still think, even today, that there always has to be a better way, no matter what we're doing," he says. "You should never be satisfied with what you did last year. We have a saying around

here that the only constant thing is change. If we can't change something we did last year, then we aren't looking hard enough at ways to improve."

So what makes an ideal mentor of assistant superintendents? Clearly, not everyone is cut out for the job. But Mangum believes it starts with being a true professional yourself with a solid track record of integrity and honesty.

"Most likely, those people who are that way were mentored by someone who also was like that further down the line," says Mangum.

Even though assistant superintendents' responsibilities have significantly expanded today from what they were, say, 20 years ago, Mangum believes the fundamentals of mentoring them haven't changed. The one thing he has always not done is tell them what to do.

"I want them to figure it out themselves," says Mangum. "I say, 'Well, how would you solve it?' Their way may not be exactly the way I would do it, but that's not the issue. The issue is getting the job done. So we go back and forth, and maybe I learn some-

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thing and they learn something.”

By making assistant superintendents part of the problem-solving process, Mangum empowers them and also lets them make mistakes – another important part of the mentoring process.

“How do you make good decisions? How do you gain valuable

experience? By making bad decisions,” Mangum says.

Even though there are more turf school graduates than there are job openings right now, Mangum believes there will always be room for the “good people.”

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ability will struggle,” he says.

Like Mangum, Marc Davison, superintendent of Green Bay Country Club, believes that one of an assistant superintendent’s biggest downfalls when starting out is being a “know-it-all.” He has found some are a little overconfident coming out of college, and there are lots of little things that can’t be taught in school that they still need to learn.

“So a lot of times you have to rein them in a little,” says Davison. “But that’s the beauty of having a 30-year veteran mentoring you. He has been through all of those ‘little things’ – dealing with the grounds committee, the board of directors, the golf committee, etc. Still, assistant superintendents can’t have this mentality of, ‘I’m in charge and I don’t care what the membership says.’ We have to maintain the course, but we have to do it in cooperation and coordination with what the membership wants.

Like Mangum, Davison doesn’t believe in dictating his own way of doing things but encouraging the assistant superintendent and the rest of his team to come up with solutions themselves.

“I let them explore on their own,” he says. “I’m not a real decisive guy, so when I have to make a decision, I get my top guys together and talk things out. I don’t keep a hierarchy. We’re all at the same level, and I want to hear what everyone has to say.”

Davison likes to give authority to assistant superintendents he’s mentoring, but he says you have to gradually build up to that and not load too much onto them right out of the gate.

“A guy right out of college at his first assistant job is not going to feel comfortable leading a crew for weeks on end, but eventually they understand the routine and you can start letting them coor-

dinate things,” says Davison.

As an example, if Davison is rebuilding his bunkers, he might put his assistant in charge of a certain part of the task – the sand removal, drainage tile or edging. In his mind, giving them the authority shows them that not everything has to be his way.

“I want them to know that I don’t think I’m any better than them, and I think they appreciate that,” says Davison.

Davison also prescribes to a tactful approach to mentoring assistant superintendents, especially if he notices something he doesn’t feel is right. The last thing he wants to do is discourage them or squelch their authority by calling them out in front of the crew.

“I might pull them aside and say, ‘Hey, I think we need to change cups today, but I don’t see it on the board,’” Davison says. “It’s all about doing it in an appropriate way.”

Also like Mangum, Davison believes in the power of making mistakes. He feels that assistant superintendents can learn more from their failures than their successes. And their mentors should expect failures so they’re better equipped to deal with them when they do happen.

“Whoever is doing the mentoring needs to understand that their assistant is going to fail,” he says. “They shouldn’t get alarmed if they do fail or go in the wrong direction. It’s not the end of the world.”

Brian Sullivan, director of Belair Country Club in Los Angeles, has a rather frank opinion of how some of the assistant superintendents he has mentored might characterize their former summers under his tutelage: hell.

“But most tell me a couple years later that it was one of the best summers of their lives,”

says Sullivan of the mentoring process. He believes a good mentor leads by example, acts and behaves like a professional, and is willing to spend the time and resources necessary to develop another individual.

A good student, says Sullivan, is one who has a desire to learn and attempts to be the example.

“They’re at work early and ask questions late,” says Sullivan. “They may not know the answers, but they desire to find them.”

Sullivan tells the story of one former assistant he mentored who stayed so late he used to have to go find him in the dark to lock up the shop. Another superintendent once asked Sullivan about what kind of worker this assistant was, and Sullivan replied, “I would never ask him to dig anything for fear that he would bore through to China.

Attitude and experience are also important in an understudy, says Sullivan, along with the proper education. “An education is the catalyst for success in the marketplace,” he says.

Still, Sullivan acknowledges that not everyone is the same, a nod to Mangum’s lesson on people management. Each assistant up for mentoring has different attitudes, thresholds and desires. But Sullivan says developing them is akin to baseball.

“You’re the coach,” he says. “Early on, someone you initially placed in the outfield may watch the infielders and develop. Eventually, as they acquire new abilities, you can move them into the middle infield. And boy, are you a proud individual when they move on to coach another team.” **GCI**

Jason Stahl is a Cleveland-based freelance writer and frequent GCI contributor.