

HOW TO GET

This ain't the time to be monkeying around with job security. GCI g



FIRING

gives you great employment insights from the best in the business!

By Bruce Williams, CGCS

If you work in this industry long enough, then sooner or later you begin to hear the torrid stories as to why golf course superintendents get fired. In fact, as a headhunter I often hear several sides of these story – from golf facilities and from superintendents.

While most superintendents tend to see the pink slips coming, you can be blind to the signs of an imminent career suicide. More times than not, things slowly build up over time. Eventually, there is the straw that breaks the camel's back and disaster can no longer be averted.

Hey, it's tough enough to keep your job in today's market, even if you are performing well. And while some circumstances are outside the realm of your control, there are enough hazards out there that can bring your career to a screeching halt. Let's look at some surefire ways superintendents get themselves fired and, most importantly, how to keep you on a greensmower and off the unemployment line.

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COVER STORY

CAREER COUNTERMEASURE

PLAN B

Have a Plan B for your career and be prepared for the next step. Solid advice is to keep your head on a swivel as nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Is your resume ready? Have you built a strong set of skills that employers would want? Don't wait until the pink slip arrives to be ready for the next step in your career. Statistics indicate that we will likely have as many as six different employers during our careers. Knowing that, it would bode well to prepare in advance for the inevitable.

WHO'S THE BOSS? Repeat after me: "It's their golf course."

When you believe the golf course is yours and that the members should follow your lead, then it is time to move on down the road. There is a huge difference between taking pride in your work and thinking you rule the kingdom. Never get too big for your britches. Be humble and appreciative that you are entrusted with the care of a golf course and always remember who's the boss.

CHA-CHA-CHA CHANGES. Change is life's only constant, and the golf course management industry is no exception. It may be new standards, new equipment, new cultural practices or any variety of "new" things. Most people who own or manage golf courses are accustomed to change. In fact, they expect change to happen. It is better that you are aware of potential change and then manage it along the way.

Too many times I hear stories of a great superintendent who drew a line in the sand and resisted change only to find that the next change at the club was bringing in a new superintendent who embraced change.

Here's an anecdote. A superintendent friend of mine had a long tenure at nice golf club. With a few years left before he planned to retire the club wanted to do a restoration of the classic golf course. That superintendent believed it would ruin the golf course. So after 30 years of employment he was asked to leave because he did not embrace the change. Remember, there is always somebody waiting in the wings to move into your spot. Instead, learn to go with the flow or be swept away if you don't lead – or want to lead – the change.

SAY WHAT? Keep your ear to the ground and listen to what members or customers are telling you.

Every job has its fair share of complaints and concerns expressed by golfers, owners and management. You need to filter what is being said and then determine your priorities. Most importantly, learn to accept constructive criticism.

If you don't listen or respond to what's happening around you, then you will be thought of as an ineffective communicator. Following a catastrophic loss of turf, lacking the skills to communicate with members and/or management is a close second to generate superintendent pink slips.

It's not unusual to hear the phrase "He wasn't a good communicator..." to describe the previous superintendent. Your ability to keep grass green is a given. Your interpersonal communication skills will make or break you.

And this notion extends beyond the confines of your course. Your job tenure will be short lived if you don't reach out to your golfers via blogs, websites, town hall meetings, newsletters and such. Those are forums for you to shine and keep management and golfers informed. If you don't keep people informed, then they will be left to make their own conclusions. In the end, it probably will not be to your benefit.

PROVIDE SOLUTIONS, NOT REQUIRE THEM. You were hired to manage the facility. There will always be problems that arise. The people you work for expect you to solve any and all problems. Therefore, it is best to bring solutions to management and ownership and manage the

process along the way.

Anyone who makes it a habit to head to the front office for answers to their problems will soon become expendable. Be known as the "go-to" person who solves problems and gets the job done – not some of the time, but all of the time.

By default, superintendents who are problem solvers have greater job security, especially in the current market.

SPARKS, SMOKE AND THEN FIRED.

At nearly every golf course there tends to be minor rumblings and grumbling from time to time. Those are the sparks that, if not addressed, begin to smoke and eventually turn to fire. It is a lot easier to keep things under control if caught in the earlier stages when there isn't a full-blown fire

CAREER COUNTERMEASURE

WATCH YOUR NETWORK

If you look at your employment as a job rather than a career, then you don't have to worry about developing and maintaining a network. In the event you are ever out of a job, though, there is no better support than a broad network of individuals to help you find your next opportunity.

Too often people feel very comfortable as employees of several decades and find no need to develop a strong network. If you plan on working in this industry for 40 years, then it is important to be involved and reach out to any and all who can help you manage your golf course and also help you with leads on future employment.

to extinguish. We all have encountered negative golfers from time to time. There is always a small segment of any group who is not happy all the time. Therefore, work hard to win

those people over. Out of sight, out of mind is never a strategy that works for a superintendent, whether on the course or in the clubhouse. Ignoring them will not make things better for you.

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Find out what their issues are and then kill them with kindness.

Consider this, 10 percent of the golfers are happy all of the time and 80 percent of the golfers are happy most of the time. The final 10 percent are unhappy more often than not. That being said we need to be sure the 10 percent who are negative do not infect the 80 percent in the middle. Catch negativity early and nip it in the bud. You may not be successful with all curmudgeons, but it is important to stop the fire from spreading and consuming you.

YOUR SKILLS DULL. If we rely solely on the

skills we learned while in college, then some of us would be using technology from the 1960s to manage golf courses. Education is important to learn the business and get those initial jobs. Continuing education keeps you current in those jobs. Today, there is a plethora of opportunities available to stay current. A few examples include seminars, webinars, the Golf Industry Show, chapter meetings and extension classes. Our business is not just about soil, water, grasses, weeds, insects and diseases. While it's important to stay current with those items, you must be proficient in human resources, equipment technology, new products, managing people,

and accounting and budgeting.

When trends like lightweight mowing, greens rolling, and the use of moisture sensors entered the industry there were those superintendents who were early adopters. There were also those who exclaimed "That will never happen at my course!" and are now out of a job.

Study the trends and know what is happening at courses in your area, as well as in the industry at large. Position yourself as the best-educated person at your facility so you can thoughtfully address those potential changes and trends when the time comes.

As a side note to this, despite where you are

Out of sight, out of mind is never a strategy that works for a superintendent, whether on the course or in the clubhouse. **Ignoring them will not make things better for you.** Find out what their issues are and then kill them with kindness.



with your career, be mindful of your age. For the younger portion of the superintendent ranks it is important to act in a more mature fashion than your actual age. Learn from mentors, always be professional and you will have a long career. For those who have three to four decades of experience under your belts, be aware of the youth nipping at your heels. It is likely they have kept current. If you follow their lead, then you will prosper in your career's twilight years. Don't become stale, and definitely don't become complacent. When you start thinking "what would they do without me" then it is likely your days are numbered.

DYNAMIC DYSFUNCTION. The mission, vision and goals of the facility need to be identified and it takes a team of people to work cohesively to accomplish those things. If walls are constructed rather than bridges to get along with fellow management, then the first casualty is usually the golf course superintendent.

When you're labeled as "difficult" it typically implies that you don't work well with the rest of the facility's management team. Remember, on a day-to-day basis, the manager and the pro have much more access to golfers and members than you do. Therefore, if you don't make every effort to cooperate and work together, then your fate can be sealed with regard to an issue before you even have the opportunity to do any damage control. Each member of the management team may have different roles, but it is essential that all have the same goals for the success of the facility.

FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON. This goes without saying, but break a few laws and regulations and see what happens.

The EPA or OSHA rarely shows up on your doorstep for a social call. Most likely it's a harbinger for a very bad, very long day. If the yellow tape goes across the driveway and the club is closed because someone overlooked the laws, then someone will have to take the fall – most likely that person will be you. Become embroiled in a severe enough infraction and it could mean the permanent end of your career in this industry.

Even the best-looking turf will not help you to keep your job when the oversights have not been addressed. Develop a compliance program and make management and ownership aware of it. If they choose not to upgrade things and be compliant, then you have done your duty and the choice is yours

as to whether you want to continue your employment in that environment.

WORK VS. PLAY. Be cognizant that the golf course is your workplace – not a frat house. You are an employee and it is expected that you will conduct yourself and your business operations in a professional manner. There is a huge difference between being congenial and cordial vs. being one of the guys.

Play too much golf and you will warrant criticism from members as well as colleagues. Likewise, gambling, drinking, or hanging out with your members is a good way to alienate yourself to all those outside of that circle. Keep your personal life to yourself. Getting close to your golfers or their families will usually not end up with a positive result. Separate your social life from your professional life. You stand not only to lose your job, but that dark cloud around your behavior may follow you the rest of your career.

COMMON SENSELESS. When it comes to ethics, I remember what my father taught me more than 40 years ago. Whatever you do as a golf course superintendent, if you are unsure if it is ethical, then consider whether you would write that action on a 3x5 card and wear it on your forehead to your next green committee meeting.

Next time you consider accepting baseball tickets, golf junket trips, gift cards, etc., then you should be able to explain the purpose of the gifts and how they were utilized. Employers want a superintendent who negotiates the best prices on products and who is not driven by premiums and incentives. This is a very fine line to walk that is fraught with gray

areas. However, be warned that scenarios that reek of inappropriate ethical behavior will lead to job loss.

ABUSE AND LOSE. If you abuse substances or alcohol it will cost you your job. Some employers will afford you an opportunity to enter a rehab program. You usually get one chance to clean up and put this behind you. Employers are very reluctant to hire anyone who has a history of repeated abuse.

While it is abuse of another nature, there are the few out there who treat their employees poorly. When staff reports constant verbal abuse, then management will decide if it is easier to change your staff or get rid of you. Odds are that if the complaints are constant then the superintendent will be on the losing end of that battle.

Keep your grass green and your golf course playable. Beyond that, understand the circumstances that are common in terminations and stifling careers.

You need to be a true professional to not only succeed, but to enjoy a long, unblemished career. Your conduct and behavior sets the tone for how you will be viewed by employers and, better yet, future employers. Knowledge of current trends and a vision for the future will bring success as a superintendent, but being alert to common pitfalls will prevent you from committing career suicide. **GCI**

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GET BACK IN THE GAME

Okay. So you've been fired. It's not the end of the world. You can turn this situation around.

Here are 10 steps to move on with your career.

1. List and analyze the reasons you were terminated.
2. Separate perceptions from reality.
3. Learn from what just happened.
4. Conduct a self evaluation. Is there a long-term pattern that led to your termination?
5. Be able to explain your dismissal.
6. Establish a plan for change to prevent a repeat that led to your firing.
7. Make no negative comments about your previous employer... just move on.
8. Reach out to your existing network, share your situation and ask for some assistance.
9. Make finding a job your full-time job.
10. Don't make the same mistakes twice.