



Engage Plan B

Your career as a golf course superintendent hasn't worked out. Never fear, says Bruce Williams, you have options.

by Bruce Williams, CGCS

People aspiring to be golf course superintendents spend a lot of time and money to move up the ranks in the profession. It is not uncommon for superintendents to spend four years in college and as many as 10 years working on the crew, learning as an intern and eventually joining the management team as an assistant golf course superintendent. Golf course management is a very specialized industry and it does require a lot of training and education to manage facilities worth millions of dollars with equipment fleets at close to \$1 million and budgets from \$300,000 to \$2 million for an 18-hole golf course.

I often get calls from people who are looking to the future, some are just planning ahead, and others find themselves unemployed and looking for a new job or even a new career path. Typically, golf course superintendents are good planners when it comes to their courses, but they are lacking when it comes to thinking ahead about their careers. With more golf courses closing than opening it's obvious golf is not growing. This has made employment into a game of musical chairs. Fewer jobs are available and many of those are being filled internally or with recent grads. Considering all of this, there is no time better than the present for superintendents to develop Plan B in their careers.

Plan B may or may not be a direction you currently want to go, but it provides alternatives should the need or desire arise to make a switch in your career plans.

TYPICAL RESPONSE. Whenever I ask a superintendent what he would do if he wasn't a superintendent there are always the typical answers. They usually start off with the main three answers of selling equipment, fertilizer, or chemicals in the turf market. Yes, that is a viable career path and many have been successful in those endeavors. We all know how many of those jobs open up in our areas in any given year and it may be even less than the amount of open superintendent positions. If one goes that route it is beyond knowing the products and managing turf.

Good salespeople will be successful when they learn how to sell, build a book of business, service their clients, and bring value to their customers. It may take time to grow sales to make the new boss happy and don't expect it to happen overnight.

MOVING UP. Another obvious career alternative is to move on up in the management structure and become a director of golf or a general manager. I am seeing more and more clubs taking a good look at their superintendents to fill the top jobs when they become available. Owners and boards

recognize the commitment, education, expertise and skills superintendents have qualify them for a top job. As costs are being cut it is not surprising to see more golf facilities downsizing at the management level. Where it once was standard to have a pro, manager and superintendent, now there will be fewer people in management providing opportunities for supers to vie for the top job.

Consider moving outside of your comfort zone to open up new career opportunities. For example, some people are very good at their hobbies and could easily transfer those skills into a new business. A fellow who worked for my father enjoyed the outdoors and flying. Eventually he turned his offseason job of being a bush pilot into being a full-time pilot and guide in Alaska. Another fellow was an avid photographer. He took those skills and has risen prominently into one of the best landscape and outdoor photographers around. A neighboring superintendent in Chicago loved to fish. He liked it so much he started a charter boat business to take clients out fishing on Lake Michigan and it became his full-time job. These are a few examples of people who have taken a passion and turned it into a business venture.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX. One we run out of the standard alternatives and the few


TRANSFERABLE SKILL SETS

Sadly, many believe all they know and can do is to be a golf course superintendent. Being a superintendent is a wonderful career path. But things are changing in the industry and I suggest people look at what skills they have and what skills they need to develop to be marketable in the current economy and employment picture. Here is a list of typical skills many superintendents possess that transcend into other employment opportunities:

- Scheduler
- Administrator
- Logistics
- Fleet manager
- Purchaser
- Planner
- Organizer
- Communications
- Tech savvy
- People manager
- Motivator
- Trainer
- Budget management
- Resource manager
- Negotiator
- Educator

Of course, there is advanced training, as well. These specialized areas include:

- Horticulture
- Environmental science
- Plant diseases
- Vegetable and crop production
- Tree care
- Landscape
- Drainage
- Landscape design
- Soil



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hobbies or passions we might have it is time to do some real thinking. As usual, I don't intend to tell you what to do. Rather, this article is intended to get you to think about other possibilities should you choose to change career paths or have hit a dead end at your facility.

The easiest examples of successful transition come from friends. I admire their entrepreneurial spirit and for having the courage to take the leap to think outside the box. Some transitioned before leaving their superintendent positions while others had to do it on the spur of the moment.

Greg Wojick is a well-known superintendent in the Connecticut market. At the height of his career he opted to step back and build a business. Greg used some of the skills he needed as a superintendent and added a few more. Currently, his business develops websites and also works with planning and mapping for golf courses.

Wolfgang Mueller was a neighbor of mine in Chicago. He managed Onwentsia Club for many years. Wolfgang had some very prominent members and one decided to develop his farm into a wonderful golf course (Conway Farms Golf Club) and also to develop part of the parcel into housing and commercial real estate. It took quite a few years for Wolfgang to develop the site for Mr. R.D. Stuart and his partners, but land planning, project management and such were the skills that allowed Wolfgang to manage the process and the property. In addition, Mr. Stuart also had other properties in Wyoming and South America that required attention so Wolfgang became a property manager in several states and around the globe.

You may remember Danny Quast who did a great job as superintendent at Medinah CC in Chicago. After his stint at

Medinah, Danny decided it was time to use his business and organizational skills to develop several businesses in Wisconsin. Danny has a tree nursery and landscape business and also has a very successful distributorship from which he sells a variety of materials to the horticulture industry.

Mike Harmon was working for Toll Bros. building Moorpark Country Club. Once that course was built out there were several opportunities to work in other areas of the organization. Mike had the right skills to move into such a position. Today, he still works for Toll Bros., but his days are spent negotiating contracts, obtaining permits, planning infrastructure. Mike's story is a case of not leaving an organization, but rather changing roles and utilizing a number of his superintendent skills to take on greater responsibility.

We all spend considerable time communicating. Now that may be as a writer, a blogger, a speaker or as a planner. It is easy to see a few of us who have taken those skills and put them to use after our superintendent days were over. Publications are always looking for solid writers. Hone your skills and submit articles to publications like Golf Course Industry. Then there are some writers who have gone on to develop complete books like Mike Bavier and his book "Practical Golf Course Management – The Magic of Greenkeeping."

Superintendents are problem solvers. Thus, there are times when we must invent new tools and equipment to accomplish the tasks at hand. A few superintendents have turned that into a viable manufacturing and distribution operation for their products. Some have even sold their patents or rights to a few of the major manufacturers. Recently a new product has been developed and is sold as Sun-Screen. This product is superintendent driven and sold. Without Gary Grigg, who was a superintendent at the time, there

would not be Gary's Green and a variety of other products from that company. Gary walked away from a prominent job as a superintendent to start his own business which has become very successful in the last 17 years.

A FEW MORE TO ADD TO THE LIST. Several of my friends gave up their jobs to venture into golf course architecture and design work. Now they may never equal the heights of Tom Fazio or Robert Trent Jones as architects, but a few have found sufficient work in smaller projects and remodels that bigger firms may turn down.

Lots of businesses hire professional trainers. These people learn the technicalities of a product line or principles that they share with audiences. Good communication skills prepare you for this and it is an easy transition.

I have met a fair number of former superintendents now working in the government sector, especially for water agencies. We understand water. We understand projects. We understand processes and we understand project management. Altogether, those traits makes for a good fit.

While not all turf is the same it is fairly easy to switch the type of grass areas we maintain. Superintendents have become sports turf managers for minor league teams, parks systems, school fields and even cemeteries.

For those wanting to stay closer to golf, consider becoming an agronomist for the USGA or a regional agronomist for a management company. Start your own management company or golf course maintenance outsourcing? Better yet, buy a golf course at rock bottom prices and you can be your own boss.

Superintendents have many skills. We do many things inside or on the peripheral of our existing jobs. Think about your alternatives and develop a Plan B. It is always nice to have options, especially when it comes to our careers.

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