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Feedback and focus



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Logic says by this time of year maintaining golf courses should be a breeze. Routines should be well established, and everyone should be in a groove. My experience, however, is that the opposite often is true.

Why? Weather is a factor but not the only one. Your seasonal workers, and perhaps your full-time workers (including yourself), are beginning to think about the next step in their lives – back to school, to their regular routine, to cooler weather, the next season at the course – and the current job is becoming boring and old.

Although frustrating, this decrease of focus and performance is natural. So what does a golf course superintendent do? The responses I observe fall into two categories:

1. Accept a decline of effort and performance justifying the season is almost over.

2. Reprimand employees for their poor attitude and performance.

Neither works because neither represents the appropriate feedback response. The first violates the point good performance should always be treated differently than poor performance.

A reprimand should be reserved for situations in which poor performance is caused by the employee's lack of motivation, energy, concentration, focus, etc. On the surface, that's the case here, but employees aren't losing focus intentionally – their attention is being diverted from the present to the future. In response, you need to take steps to increase employee focus.

1. Copious amounts of positive feedback. During a recent GCSAA Web cast, I asked superintendents how many times they provided positive feedback during the past 24 hours. The most common response was once or twice. Few said five or more. Positive feedback costs nothing and usually enhances the attitude and energy level of the giver and receiver. I recently met with a golf course maintenance employee who said he was so excited by receiving compliments from the assistant superintendent, a golfer and the pro on the same day he woke the next morning before his alarm sounded and arrived at work early.

Increase the quantity of excellent positive feedback to re-enforce and maintain excellent job performance. Also, enhance the effectiveness of your positive feedback by

improving its quality. Feedback must be:

- **Specific.** Instead of saying, "You're doing a great job," say, "I just came from the 7th green, and it looks great. The green is perfectly mowed, and the bunkers look fantastic." The actions or outcomes that are the basis for positive feedback must be clear.

- **Timely.** Provide the feedback now.

- **Genuine.** Be sincere. Providing feedback can't be or appear to be a chore. It's your job as a superintendent, and you must be excellent at your job just as your expect excellence from your employees.

Be especially conscientious about conveying all positive feedback you receive to your staff. Think how you feel when you receive positive feedback from golfers, pro shop personnel and service reps. Not conveying those compliments to your staff is a huge missed opportunity.

Providing copious amounts of positive feedback isn't easy. You've been trained and are an expert at detecting and solving problems on your course. In a supervisory role, you have to look for more than problems. You have to catch your employees doing something right.

Provide the appropriate positive feedback when your employees succeed. If you do so for the next 21 days, increased feedback should become a habit.

2. Increased nonmonetary compensation. Many of you can't increase wages or benefits for your employees, so think about compensation as a total rewards system rather than dollars per hour. In a total rewards system, compensation is monetary and nonmonetary. By increasing positive feedback, you have increased the nonmonetary rewards, but you can do more.

Think about compensation as meeting employee needs and wants. What do your employees – probably mostly young, mostly seasonal – need or want on a hot August day? I recently met with each maintenance employee at a golf course. More than half recalled a day three weeks earlier when the superintendent treated them all to an ice cream cone at the clubhouse. Little things are more important than they seem. They carry a large message: You're valued; you're important. Here are some compensation ideas:

- Make certain, especially on hot days, everyone has a lot of cool water or other liquids.

- Provide adequate breaks. Research shows more work is finished during a given time when adequate breaks are provided. We all need to relax and regenerate.

- Listen to your employees for ideas that will hit home with them.

- Provide special rewards, which are best provided for a specific accomplishment, such as a great looking course during the hottest weather in three years, a compliment from the best golfer in the region or a specific goal exceeded.

3. Actions that help employees retain job focus. As the season progresses, it's easy to let everyone fall into a routine that leads to boredom and reduces job focus. To combat entropy:

- Keep everyone learning by maintaining and increasing training for new tasks and redirection to exceed expectations on current tasks.

- I'm amazed at how many seasonal employees return to golf courses year after year. This might be the time to provide new opportunities to seasonal employees to see how hard you wish to recruit or promote them for next season.

- Provide opportunities to rotate tasks, especially ones enjoyed, to provide variety.

4. Lead by example. One of my favorite leadership books ("The Leadership Moment" by Michael Useem) highlights examples to develop leadership principles. From the unrelenting determination and optimism of Apollo 13 flight director Eugene Kranz, the author deduces: "Expecting high performance is prerequisite to its achievement among those who work with you. Your high standards and optimistic anticipations will not quarantine a favorable outcome, but their absence will assuredly create the opposite." Use this principle to lead your course by example:

- Set the tone. Don't let yourself start thinking "It's hot! It's humid! It's getting boring! The season will soon be over!"

- The hotter it is, the more you would like to be in your office or other cool places. However, the hotter it is, the more you need to be out working with your team.

These thoughts will inevitably seep into the consciousness of everyone (including yourself) as the season (or the really hot weather in the South) winds down. However, you can prevent those feelings from permeating your staff. GCN

by the NUMBERS*

130 The number of U.S. markets in which the median green fee at 18-hole regulation courses is less than \$40

65 million

The number of rounds, which is 13 percent of the U.S. total, generated annually in Michigan, Illinois and Ohio

255 The number of new golf facilities under construction as of July 18

119 The number of golf course additions that are under construction as of July 18

14

The percentage of all golf facilities in the United States that are located in Michigan, Illinois and Ohio

93

The number of golf course additions that have been completed this year as of July 18

62

The number of new golf facilities that have been completed this year as of July 18

4.5

The percentage increase of rounds at U.S. facilities through May year over year

*All numbers from the National Golf Foundation



HAVE INCREASED FUEL PRICES AFFECTED OTHER AREAS OF YOUR MAINTENANCE BUDGET?



Trick shot artist, instructor celebrates golf show anniversary

Fort Myers, Fla. - Trick shot artist and golf instructor Mike Calbot celebrates 25 years as "The Golf Doctor" in Southwest Florida. Calbot has been the local voice of golf, and his TV program has run on WINK every week since 1981. He's the author of a golf instructional video and dozens of articles about golf. Calbot has been a swing analyst and golf instructor to more than 6,000 people since 1988. He has been instrumental in developing junior golf in Southwest Florida, helping establish local programs for children to learn the game. For more information about Calbot, visit www.webgolfdirector.com.

QUOTABLE

"It has all the earmarks to serve as a poster child for ecological progressiveness." - golf course architect **Steve Smyers** about The Golf Club at BridgeWater, which is scheduled to open in October in Lakeland, Fla.

"We selected Champion, which we have on two of the other three courses here, because it's given us the most consistently good putting surfaces for the longest time." - **Ken Gorzycki**, director of golf course maintenance at Barton Creek Resort & Spa in Austin, Texas

"If asked to do something, don't say you can't do something because it's too hard. Most things can be done if you take the time and come up with a plan. Sometimes guys don't go through with it." - **Marshall Fearing**, director of grounds at Castle Pines Golf Club in Colorado

"I don't hire skills. I hire personality and develop someone's skills." - **Rock Lucas**, owner of Charwood Country Club in West Columbia, N.C.

Maintenance consulting



GCN INTERVIEWS
BLAND COOPER,
DIRECTOR OF
AGRONOMY FOR
VALLEYCREST
GOLF COURSE
MAINTENANCE

Photo by Scott Stiles

Anything but average

NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF SAVING MONEY, BLAND COOPER CONSULTS WITH SUPERINTENDENTS TO HELP IMPROVE THE GOLF COURSES THEY MANAGE

by
PAT
JONES

There is little about Bland Cooper's career that fits his rather unique first name. He's been a superintendent, owner, general manager, turf consultant and is now director of agronomy for Calabasa, Calif.-based ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance.

When he was younger, Cooper seemed destined to follow in the legal footsteps of his dad, a circuit court judge, but he also inherited the family green thumb (his great grandmother was a master gardener) and started working at courses early on. Thus, the road to law school took a sharp turn as he ended up at Horry-Georgetown Technical College's turf program in South Carolina and, from there, jumped immediately into a wide-ranging career in golf course management.

His passion for the business is evident as he describes his career; the current state of the industry; and the good, bad and ugly of consulting and management companies.

Q Where the heck did you get a name like "Bland"?

It was my mother's maiden name. The Coopers are big on family names.

Q How'd you get into this crazy business?

I never was passionate about anything else. My father was an attorney, so I always thought that's what I should be. In college, I changed majors several times and took a law class one semester and realized I didn't care for it much. I had started playing golf when I was younger and fell in love with it. I had a friend who worked at a local course and got a job there working carts. At 14, I started triplexing greens. By 16, I was sharpening reels and doing much more on the course than anyone that age would be allowed to do today. I'm most comfortable when I'm given a wide berth, and I definitely was given a wide berth. No matter what I did, I always

came back to golf.

After my junior year of college, I decided to go down to Horry-Georgetown. My dad was supportive, but my mom wasn't too sure. I went down there thinking, "This will probably be a semester off from school." But I loved it and had a lot of wonderful instructors who challenged me. After my first year at H-G, the thought of being a lawyer never crossed my mind again.

Q You started out as a regular superintendent. What did you learn from that?

You learn about earning the trust of others and executing your program. I enjoyed every minute of it, but I wanted to get into ownership. So I started the Sulstone Group with Sam Shumate.

Q What's changed for a typical Southern superintendent during your career?

Twenty years ago, if you were able to grow bentgrass in the South, you were considered a hero. Now, it's almost a given. It's amazing.

Q You're still young, but you've done a lot. What would you tell a young person who wants to get into the business now?

The one thing I'd stress to a young guy who is coming out of turf school right now is courses often hire from among well-known clubs and superintendents. That's the route I would have gone if I had to do it again. That's crucial to the development of your career. It's tough to move up the ladder in this industry unless you've done that.

Q What's the biggest mistake superintendents make?

Too many superintendents fail to continue to learn new things every day. This industry's not getting any dumber ... it's just getting

smarter. You have to continue to learn just to stay up to speed.

I know a superintendent who makes his former assistants call him every month with something new they've learned. That's great.

Q You did double-duty as a course owner and agronomist for a while. What was that like?

It was a great learning experience. I understand the financial side of the business much better than I used to, and I have a better appreciation for marketing and revenue development. But my heart was always on the agronomic side.

Sam and I sold off the Sulstone properties to a developer in Charlotte and some other people. It was a very amicable separation. We both just wanted to go different ways.

Q Tell us about ValleyCrest.

I'm the director of agronomy, and I report to Terry McGuire and work with our regional superintendents. I still have a couple of consulting clients, but I'm focused on helping our superintendents and assessing new potential properties.

I'm doing a lot of the same things as a superintendent only on different properties. I spend half my time on existing properties and the other half assessing potential new clients. When you're providing fixed-cost maintenance, you need to uncover every single stone to make sure the return on investment is there. We're at 43 18-hole equivalents now, and we're hoping to be at 50 soon. Half our portfolio is in California and Florida, but we're growing throughout the country.

Q Why is ValleyCrest different?

The difference is that we're specialized. We've made a dedicated and concerted

effort to do this effectively and profitably. We've also hired good quality people. ValleyCrest is the largest landscape contractor in the country, and it was started by Burton Sperber out of the back of his truck more than 50 years ago. That culture permeates everything we do on the golf side as well. We're growing in the right way ... a healthy way.

ValleyCrest isn't into golf course ownership. We're a maintenance contracting company, so we look at courses differently. We take a hard look at a course to establish a fixed price.

We're also able to provide much more support to our superintendents because of consultants like Ted Horton, Mike Huck and myself. We have many resources that our superintendents can use.

Q What are you looking for when you assess a course?

We assess a course for two or three days. Agronomically speaking, we want to align ourselves with the proper product. We want to make sure we reach a partnership with a client that wants to improve his facility, not just someone that wants to reach status quo. We're not in the business of saving money.

Q What kind of problems do you encounter during assessments?

Courses that are 15 years old or older often have antiquated pump stations and bunkers that need to be replaced. We also see a lot of greens that haven't been well-managed. It's common to find pH issues or soil chemistry problems. We take 700 to 1,000 pictures, profile the soil of every green and tee and measure organic matter. You're always going to find problems with the property and, more times than not, it's not the fault of the superintendent.

Q Do you like it?

I get personal satisfaction out of it. I get to work companywide with our 12 regional superintendents and move around based on need.

Q Why do management companies have a negative reputation?

Management companies that own their own courses have to find ways to make the bottom line work to pay off their debt. In many markets today, debt coverage ratios are upside down, and that makes it impossible to service large debts and provide the resources to properly maintain the property. That's business suicide. You're going to fail. Also,

most executives of management companies understand the revenue side of the business well but don't understand the expense side, like golf course maintenance.

I've never found a correlation between spending and success. They always rely on the superintendent to squeeze an extra dollar out of the operation. They blame the effect, not the cause.

Q Some management companies try to solicit new business by going over the head of the superintendent. Do you guys do that?

ValleyCrest tried that once many years ago, as did many other companies. I remember getting one of those at the time and getting extremely angry. That was a long time ago. Today, it's different. There's been much fence-mending during the past 10 years.

Our current philosophy now – based on input from Ted Horton and others – is to take business that comes in over the transom—people who contact us – or through a superintendent we know and trust. We never go onto a property without contacting a superintendent first. We want him to be the first person who knows. We're a company of superintendents.

Q What do you mean by that?

We aren't for everybody. We've looked at a facility and said, 'You know what, we can help you but only marginally.' We can't fix everybody or meet everybody's needs. We never, ever reduce a superintendent's resources when we go in. We can't compensate for lack of resources.

We also have efficiencies because of our size. Toro has been a wonderful partner for us. And we're self-insured on workers' compensation. Our superintendents do 95 percent of their purchasing on their MasterCard. No purchase orders ... it's clean and fast. It's bad business to have your highest-paid employee shuffling papers all day long.

Finally, when you reach a certain size – I think we're the seventh largest multicourse operator – there's a lot of ability to move internally and a lot of opportunity for training and learning. We hope that internally generates many great people. We can almost guarantee them opportunities. That's versus a stand-alone club where the opportunities might be limited. It's not for everybody. There are certain personalities that don't work well within the structure. There's a certain amount of oversight that some people aren't comfortable with. We don't take away the individuality.

Q The business seems to be going toward a more team-oriented approach, but I'm sure you still run across facilities that work in 'silos' where managers don't talk much with each other.

The only industry I know that works successfully in silos is the insurance business. They don't want information shared between departments.

As everybody's tightened their belts in the golf industry during the past few years, it's become critical for everyone to share information across departments. The g.m. drives that. Superintendents need to be aggressive finding out what's going on throughout the whole facility. There are still too few superintendents and golf pros who will go out after work and have a beer and talk. Lack of communication is a recipe for disaster.

Q You've done a lot of consulting, and that can be another dirty word among superintendents. How do you respond?

Memberships don't bring in a consultant when everything is working perfectly. The superintendent in that situation needs to meet with them right away, understand the reasons and get a handle on it. For every (consulting) horror story, there are a hundred success stories. But, unfortunately, bad things happen, so superintendents have every reason to flinch. But, perception isn't always reality.

In some cases, the members already have made up their mind, and the consultant is just a means to an end. I consulted for a club last year where one of my best friends was the superintendent. I worked hard to get them to understand, but they still terminated him. The decision was already made.

A consultant should never go into a club where he knows the superintendent is going to get fired. It needs to be transparent. I'd never go into a club without feeling comfortable the superintendent wanted me there.

Q What's next for you?

I want to keep doing exactly what I'm doing now. I have the opportunity to do just what I love to do: spend all of my time supporting superintendents and see new courses. It gives you the chance to go around and learn more and more. That rejuvenates me. Until I get burned out, it's perfect.

My father told me if you enjoy it and you're passionate about it, try to be the best you can be. It sounds like a line from one of those corny motivational posters, but it works for me. GCN



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A win for everyone

FLORIDA GOLF COURSE WILL COEXIST WITH WETLANDS, WILDLIFE AND RESIDENTS

by
**MARK
LESLIE**

*Photos by Steve
Smyers Golf
Course Architects*

Call it a quintuple win. For the golf industry in general. For wading birds and water life. For the project developers and future golfers. For the Southwest Florida Water Management District. And for golf course architect Steve Smyers.

"The project and its effects on the local environment have worked out fantastically," says Smyers, referring to The Golf Club at BridgeWater, which is now under construction and features a core golf course being built as the centerpiece of a new 757-acre residential community.

The property, which is in Lakeland, is a reclaimed phosphate mine and has 259 acres

of manmade lakes and wetlands.

"It has all the earmarks to serve as a poster child for ecological progressiveness," says Smyers, a member of the executive committee of the U.S. Golf Association, which has been an industry leader in environmental awareness.

Time will tell whether BridgeWater will be a model for golf course construction in wetland areas.

"This is something I'll be tracking for a while," says Jeff Whealton, a senior environmental scientist with the Southwest Florida Water Management District. "I hope it will be the standard.

"We haven't had the best experiences with golf courses," Whealton adds. "Some are maintained more than if they were in a subdivision setting without golf courses. Besides direct impacts, there also are possible secondary impacts from golf courses that are a concern in the review of these projects. Secondary impacts are caused by such things as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides running off of the course into the wetlands."

In BridgeWater's case, Smyers, golf course developer Dirty Five and housing developer LandMar Development aren't replacing distressed wetlands with improved wetlands – a task that wins laudatory support from most corners. They must perform under higher expectations.

The BridgeWater site contains a classic definition of a perfect ephemeral wetland, one that dries up during dry season and comes back full force in the rainy season, according to Whealton. The first time Whealton visited BridgeWater, wetlands were dry – brown, crispy vegetation that looked dead.

"If that were your snapshot in time, you would think, 'This is pitiful; how do you

get mitigation for this?' he says. "But I went back after the rainy season, and we were wading in knee-deep water with dragon flies everywhere and little frogs chirping. It was a 180-degree turnaround. It went from a moonscape to a wetland wonderland."

Some of the most important wetlands in the country are less than half-acre patches that, in Florida, are typically exempt from mitigation criteria. Frogs and tadpoles and other amphibians and invertebrates gather in these little pools, and when they dry out, they become pockets of water where the wildlife is concentrated.

Two or three wading-bird rookeries are located in the immediate area. These wetlands are like a wading-bird's buffet – a major food source, according to Whealton.

"It's very important these little wetlands be available for the wading birds," he says.

And that's precisely what the SWFWMD wants replicated by the Smyers team and Biological Research Associates of Tampa, the environmental consultant working on the project.

"The bottom line of our environmental resource permits is that the conditions in post-development have to be the same in predevelopment," Whealton says. "There has to be functional replacement."

The watchwords for wetlands mitigation are always create, enhance, restore and preserve or a combination of the four.


Smyers' design partner Patrick Andrews says that at BridgeWater they're wiping the slate clean, i.e., regrading the entire 200 acres of the golf course, except for the existing 20 acres of trees and lakes.

Smyers and the development companies reached an agreement with SWFWMD officials that all the mitigation required for the entire BridgeWater community would

AT A GLANCE

The Golf Club at BridgeWater in Lakeland, Fla.

Cost:	\$6 million
Construction began:	Spring 2005
Target date for opening:	October 2006
Course length:	7,254 yards
Par:	71
Golf course acreage:	200
Lake and wetland acreage:	259
Grass on greens:	Tifdwarf Bermudagrass
Grass on tees:	Aussie Green Bermudagrass
Grass on fairways:	Aussie Green Bermudagrass
Architect:	Steve Smyers
Developer:	Dirty Five
Builder:	John G. Walton Construction Co.
Golf course superintendent:	Sean Klotzbach



The BridgeWater site contains a classic definition of a perfect ephemeral wetland, one that dries up during the dry season and comes back in the rainy season.

be incorporated on the golf course.

"In this case, we're serving a practical need for the community because without the mitigation of these wetlands, Southwest Florida Water Management District wasn't going to permit the community," Andrews says. "So, the community gets the practical benefit of getting all their mitigation taken care of so they're not worried about weaving homes around wetlands. They get an efficiency in how they can build out their community. Plus, we get a core golf course in relationship to a strong environmental context, which makes the best golf holes and provides a great experience for the golfer."

The creation

Smyers says the development team will improve the ephemeral wetlands, creating 32 contiguous – rather than spotty and unconnected – acres that will be controlled to remain shallow year-round rather than just during the rainy season.

"It will be stunning to look at – a marvelous addition to the golf course," he says.

The water fluctuates strongly in Florida between the dry and wet seasons, but Whealton says planners knew the final out-flow elevation from the property and could plan backwards from that spot, stacking all the water back up inside the project.

Having Mobile, Ala.-based golf course builder John G. Walton Construction Co.

The entire 200 acres of the golf course, except for 20 acres of existing trees and lakes, were regraded.

Everyone wins

There are many positive aspects of the development of The Golf Club at BridgeWater, which contains a core golf course being built as the centerpiece of a new 757-acre residential community. Here are five:

- The area's wading birds get an all-you-can-eat buffet.
- The Southwest Florida Water Management District gets its replacement ephemeral wetlands, fulfilling its mission and illustrating another solution for a major development project.
- Developers LandMar and Dirty Five are able to optimize the use of their 1,500 acres and preserve precious lakes and wetlands.
- Golf course architect Steve Smyers is able to design a core golf course uninhibited by housing and take advantage of the aesthetics of viable, high-class wetlands.
- Golf wins by proving it can cohabitate with all types of wildlife, even those that eat one another.

