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## A CALL FOR PROTOCOL

During a recent interview, I was asked how I would maintain a tight budget while still creating idyllic course conditions. I've been fortunate to learn what it takes to make these decisions from one of the best. My superintendent, Robert Maibusch, CGCS, has taught me about the higher expectations placed on superintendents these days. Gone are the days of worrying about maintaining only the golf course. Along with this responsibility comes the task of building and maintaining relationships with golfers, members and staff. To many clubs, polished business competence is just as important as maintaining an exceptional golf course.

One aspect of good business policy is to have a protocol for staff professional development. Almost every business has some form of this. For example, my wife is a teacher, and every five years she's expected to acquire more than 60 hours of professional development. This is in addition to the rigorous staff development her principal provides each teacher's institute.

Much like a school principal, superintendents and assistants are charged with developing their crews professionally. Without a well-managed and trained staff, courses might be preventing themselves from reaching their full potential. A manager who appreciates proper training and communication will help staff members understand the vision and purpose of their workplace.

In my last column (January, page 10), I wrote about the visual improvement program created by the facility at which I work, the Hinsdale Golf Club. As that column indicated, the VIP program is designed to enhance quality control by providing base standards and criteria for

various routine golf course tasks. Every week, we rate our standards to measure our progress. The final outcome – we hope, at least – is to have a staff that takes ownership and shows pride in their golf course just as much as the members do.

With our VIP standards outlined in detail, the Hinsdale grounds department thought of ideas to help train our staff more. We did a good job of posting our expectations and measurements but didn't take time to sit down with each staff member individually to share club needs

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and ideas. So, using our written standards from the VIP, we changed the format and created a booklet, hoping to improve employee relations at Hinsdale in several ways. The publication shows our employees we care and want to know more about them. It also provides a means to convey the department's requirements about safety and job expectations: when it comes to ensuring employees' health and safety, no dollar amount is too high.

The training booklet contains job-specific expectations for:

- Fairway care.
- Greens care.
- Cup and tee set up.
- Bunker care.
- Tee and collar care.
- Practice range care.
- Banks and surrounds care.
- Tree care and chainsaw operation.

Specifically, each job section lists:

- Who the trainer is.

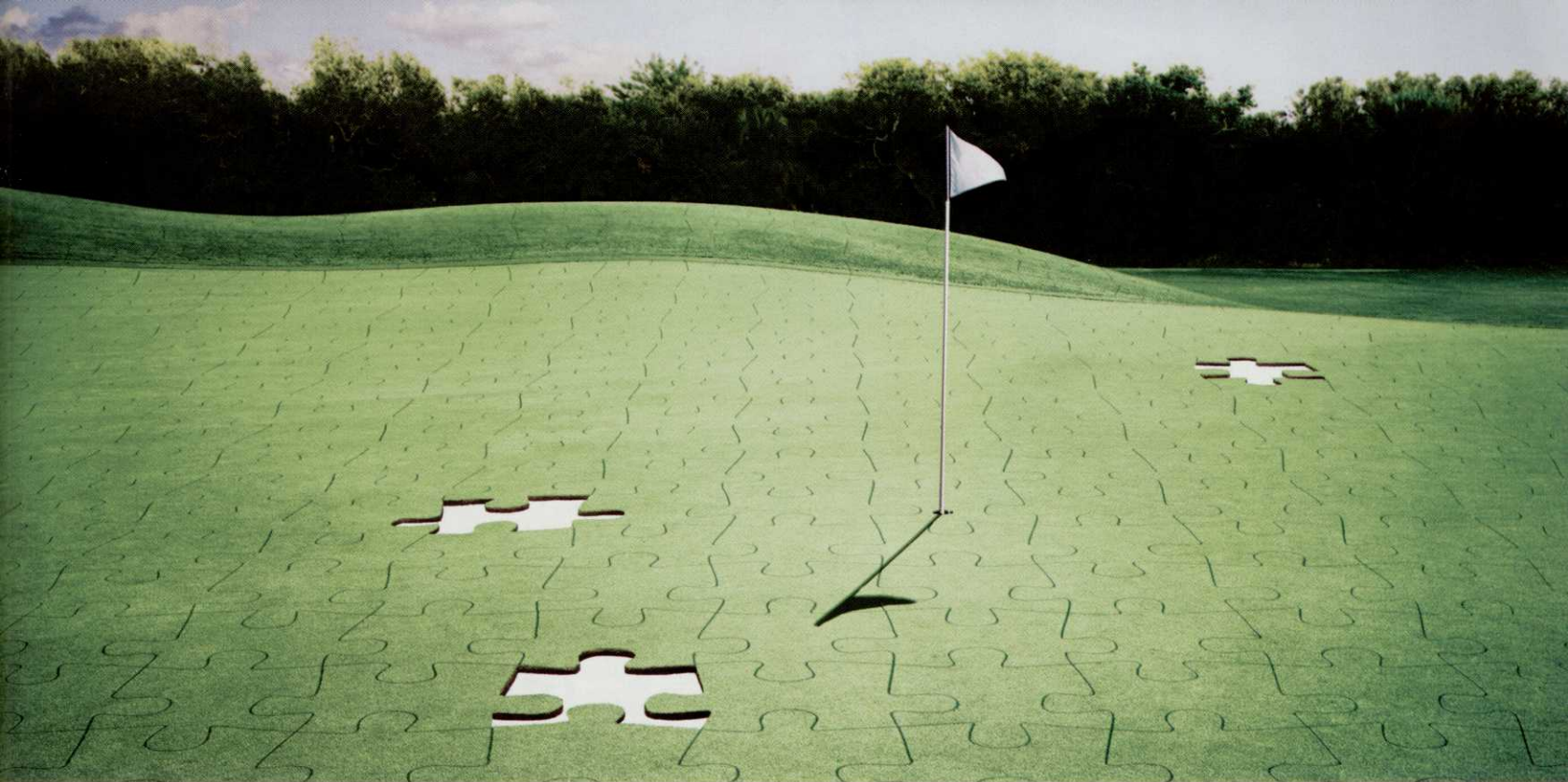
- The tools and protective equipment necessary for each job.
- What to check before the task.
- How to perform the job at the site.
- What to do after the task.

As a result of the program, Hinsdale has benefited in a number of ways. We've reduced our turnover. This year, we anticipate retaining all crew members. Staff retraining has been kept to a minimum, which allows for more time spent on maintaining course conditions. Our budget for staff salaries has been allocated more toward golf maintenance than staff training. We're able to remind staff

about proper safety precautions regularly, which has kept our workplace injuries to a minimum and keeps us compliant with Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards.

Higher expectations require superintendents and assistants to wear many hats. Maintaining idyllic course conditions is no longer our sole duty. We're now expected to be business leaders, as well. Staff development and training is one aspect of being an exceptional business leader.

So, it's important to have a training protocol in place. By doing so, you'll be able to decrease staff turnover, and allocate more resources to course maintenance instead of staff training and ensuring proper safety conditions. Surprisingly, this all relates to the original job description of superintendents and assistants: produce and maintain exceptional course conditions. **GCI**



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## RENOVATION CONSIDERATIONS

When clubs start their master plans, they focus on design issues. But it's the phasing plan suggested by most master plans that often turns out to be one of the most critical decisions clubs face. It can determine a project's success and whether it goes forward.

Historically, course renovations were executed in annual increments, except when required by disasters such as floods. These long-term plans kept a course open, kept revenue flowing in the pro shop and dining facilities, and avoided debt. During the past decade, lower interest rates and the impatience of baby boomers has accelerated the frequency of renovations. However, the current credit crunch has spawned a counter-trend toward long-term plans despite reasonable rates.

When I study each case separately, I usually recommend a complete renovation if a course's owner has the borrowing ability. There are advantages to single-year renovations. Architecturally, they achieve consistency in:

- **Design.** An architect's style changes, just as some clubs change architects.
- **Construction.** Different contractors have different shaping and construction techniques, allowing all holes to have a consistent look.
- **Play.** Older USGA greens play differently than newer ones. When suppliers go out of business or are unable to provide consistent products from year to year, clubs are forced to use different greens mix or bunker sand.
- **Maintenance.** The aforementioned differences avoid separate maintenance regimens for every hole.

Imagewise, short-term programs minimize or even avoid problems of:

- **Resentment.** Golf course disruption will be temporary, not continual.
- **Direction changes.** (See design bullet, above.)
- **Lost momentum.** Politics, costs and hassle can stop a project, leaving several

long-standing problems and some new, out-of-place architectural features.

- **Safety.** Golfers won't have to play around safety barriers, bare dirt and construction machinery.

The financial advantages of complete renovation include:

- **Construction value.** One new USGA green complex costs \$70,000, while several might cost \$45,000 each – a 36 percent savings – because the contractor's mobilization and supervision expenses are similar whether building one green or 18, creating economies of scale.

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... but "biggie sizing" construction projects makes a lot of sense in an ongoing business.

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- **Architectural value.** Architects charge the same for site visits, whether reviewing one or many holes, and usually charge a smaller percentage fee for a larger project. Fees can be 15 percent of a small project, but are more typically 6 to 8 percent of construction cost for larger ones. Additionally, larger projects attract better architects.
- **Operational savings.** Closing the course reduces, but not eliminates, maintenance and clubhouse operation costs rather than staying staffed to accommodate reduced play and revenue.
- **Reduced revenue loss.** An open facility should maintain cash flow, but partially open courses often experience significant revenue decline because golfers dislike playing through construction. Clubs that close for renovations have arranged alternate play venues, often making the "lost year" a unique experience for members.

When counting lost revenue and cost economies in a low-interest-rate environment, the cost of complete renovation is often similar to paying for projects individually, while resulting in a better product. The annual payment is obligatory, rather than optional, but "biggie sizing" construction projects makes a lot of sense in an ongoing business.

The caveat is this: These projects require extensive preplanning to ensure their benefits by finishing quickly. With a \$3-million remodel in which the course is taken out of play for 18 months, lost revenue might be 33 to 50 percent of the total project cost. Reduce that to six to nine months, and the numbers are better. To accomplish this, project design usually must:

- Provide compensatory flood storage, avoid wetlands and minimize tree clearing to avoid environmental permitting restrictions.
- Use as many existing routing and features as possible.
- Use larger contractors and/or crews.
- Consider paying a premium or incentives for an accelerated schedule.
- Have strict schedule requirements and penalties in the specs.
- Have time to hit optimum grassing dates, but allow for weather delays.
- Use a lot of sod.
- Develop a fast-track, grow-in program.

The world changes from generation to generation. Our parents and grandparents prudently paid for things as they went, and that served them well. But with current low-interest rates, high-quality contractors that can accelerate construction, and the importance of being competitive in the marketplace, it might be prudent to consider closing the course for a complete renovation.

Our parents and grandparents taught us to be financially conservative and to avoid excessive debt. However, they also told us, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right the first time!" and "Better to do it today than tomorrow." That advice might not have been meant for golf course renovations specifically, but it applies. **GC**

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## THE WALKABLE WALK

*(The following commentary relates directly to private club employment, somewhat to daily-fee employment, but not to municipal employment.)*

In my 25-plus-year career, I haven't seen a situation where so little has been done to address a serious ill that affects so many. Enough! It's time to drive the "lack of written contracts" demon from the ranks of golf course superintendents. It's time to walk the walkable walk.

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

To understand this issue, the following question must first be asked and answered: Why are so many golf course superintendents being denied written contracts when virtually every one else in golf is granted this privilege? The answer is simply one of risk management on the part of club employers. Search committee duty is looked at as a short-term, plum assignment that provides the visible opportunity for members to serve their clubs and enhance their peer status throughout the membership, provided there will be no bad hires to embarrass search-committee members.

The fear level of a bad hire is what drives the decision process relative to who gets a written contract or not. For example, because there's little risk of a bad hire when engaging a qualified golf professional, the profession enjoys the benefits of written contracts.

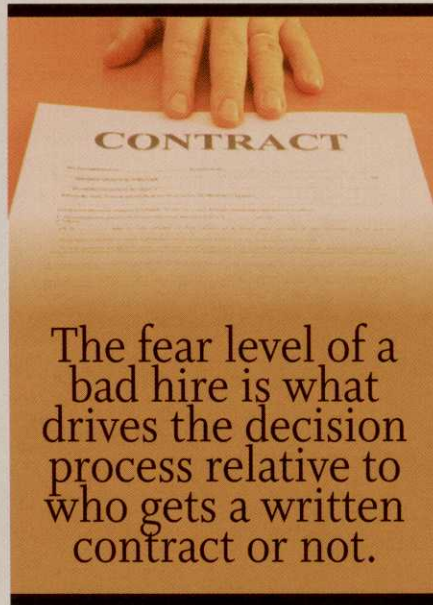
The risk element begins to surface somewhat when hiring a general manager because bad food and staffing can bring down a general manager. But because problems of this kind can be rectified rather quickly, i.e., replace the chef or pool manager, etc., engaging a general manager generally is looked at as a low-risk hire that can justify a written contract.

On the other hand, hiring a golf course superintendent is looked at as the highest employment risk possible throughout operational golf because search commit-

tees – generally not readily able to identify with the technical nature of golf course maintenance practices – don't interview candidates effectively and turf management problems tend to be long lasting.

### LEARNING TO WALK THE WALK

Clearly, if any headway is going to be made on the written contract front, it must be based on the dual premises of minimizing the risk of bad hires, while at the same time educating the national golf community to the fact that golf course superintendents are being denied written contracts unjustifiably. This theme should play well with club



committees and members throughout golf because these same people enjoy the privilege of a written employment agreement themselves or they grant such to people they employ. Therefore, while this battle appears to be winnable, victory can't be presumed and will be realized only after the issue is debated effectively on the following three fronts:

**The superintendent front.** Once offered a job and told a written contract wouldn't be

available, a superintendent should continue to negotiate with search committees in a nonconfrontational manner. Suggest that after the completion of a satisfactory first year of employment the club would guarantee four months of severance pay through the second year of employment. Then, repeat this procedure for each of the next two years of successful employment, advancing the severance guarantee in steps each year from four to eight to a cap of 12 months going into the fourth year of employment where the superintendent then would be granted a multiyear, written contract. Clearly, the superintendent will have to sell this approach early and effectively to succeed, but once this is done, success should follow because the risk has been taken out of hiring.

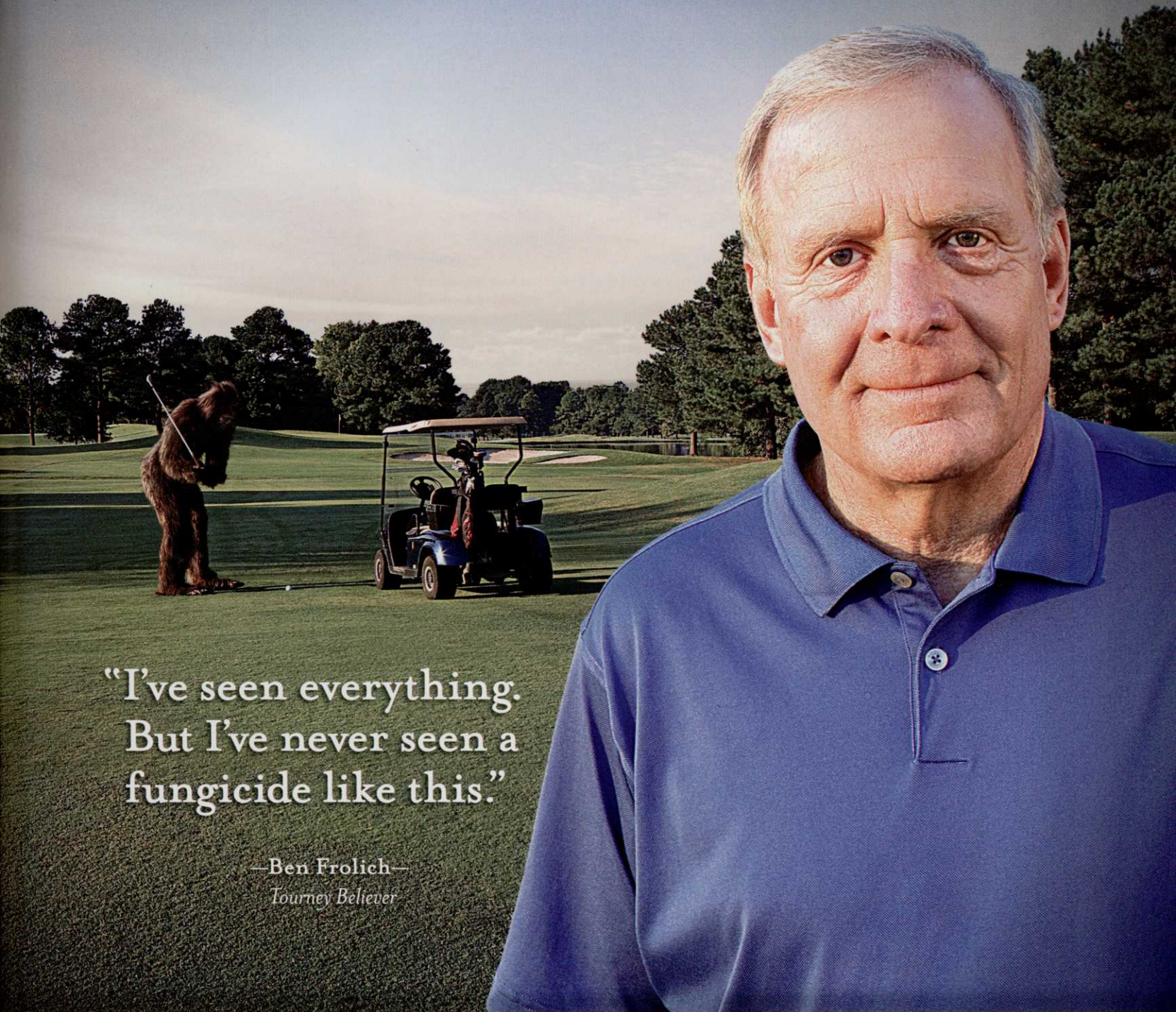
**The chapter front.** Because the GCSA chapters interact with the country's golf clubs more than any other outside entity, they should take advantage of this relationship to advance the opportunity for their members to seek and obtain written contracts. The key elements to developing this support would be that chapters (1) establish an employment relations committee to educate club search committees about the written contract issue and (2) hire a mature, business savvy, golf-experienced individual to serve as executive director and become the face of the chapter when interacting with club administrations. My next column (June) will expand on this concept in complete detail, including presenting a job description for a chapter executive director.

**The GCSAA front.** The GCSAA's role would be to use its magazine, Web site, marketing funds and access to national television spots to educate the national golf community to the inequities surrounding the written contract issue. A key factor would be noting that the one-year element is as damaging as the nonwritten element because this combination makes it difficult for otherwise eligible superintendents to establish credit.

Working in concert, golf course superintendents, their regional chapters and the GCSAA effectively can defuse this written contract issue within a few years. **GC**



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## INCREASE INFORMAL FEEDBACK

**N**o matter your golf facility's location, now's the time for you to increase the quantity and quality of informal feedback and coaching you give your crew members.

One terrific benefit of the multisession Webinars I'm teaching is I hear managers discuss their successes and challenges as they implement supervision and coaching principles and ideas. I've built on insights from these discussions to provide six suggestions for you to use to increase the productivity and job satisfaction of your maintenance staff.

**1 People want to succeed**  
Managing people, especially when your real love is turf, can be challenging and frustrating. In the midst of management, it's easy to forget the fundamental reality that your crew members want to succeed. We all want to be part of a winning team, whether through sports, family, work or a social network. Few employees head to work at 4:30 or 5:30 or 7:30 thinking, "How can I screw up at work today?"

As I listened to the discussion of successes and challenges faced when implementing the activities in the Webinar sessions, I was reminded of this reality. The stories of crew members responding to feedback and training and coaching are examples of the idea that everyone wants to succeed. I shared this observation in one of the Webinar sessions, and every manager agreed.

**2 Positive feedback**  
One of my assignments after a session is to increase the quality of positive feedback (specific actions participants want repeated) for the 21 days following. I've been amazed by the impact the implementation of this assignment has had. Here's what some have said:

- Numerous managers said the atmosphere, the culture of their business, changed. It's a more positive, pleasant

place for everyone to work.

- One manager said he was satisfied most when hearing from the spouses of his employees. They told him how much the employees appreciated the positive feedback. This example underscores the reality that most employees appreciate positive feedback even more than their immediate outward reaction indicates. Most of us aren't good at receiving positive feedback, but that doesn't mean we don't want it or appreciate it.

- Several managers said employees become more focused on doing a good job and even ask for additional tasks or responsibilities as a consequence of more and better positive feedback.

**3 Explain why**  
In the past, I've discussed providing greater clarity about acceptable behaviors and expected performance. During those discussions, I've emphasized the importance of explaining "what" and "why" when it comes to policies, tasks and performance expectations.

The Webinar discussions contained numerous instances of employees completing their tasks better and more enthusiastically when the training and coaching included explaining why. One business reported a considerable increase of product quality as a result of explaining why each step in a critical protocol is important.

**4 Redirection feedback**  
You're probably thinking this sounds great, but what about when behaviors or performances are below expectations? Our tendency as human beings is to blame others when they fail to meet expectations. Research confirms this. In reality, the failure might be caused by a) their effort, motivation or concentration, or b) the situation, as a result of circumstances beyond their control. Knowing our tendency (bias) is to blame the employee's effort, always

think about what you can do first – encouragement, training, assistance – to enable the employee to meet the expectation. This is referred to as redirection feedback.

**5 Work environment**  
I've often written about the changing role of the supervisor. Just as golf course superintendents better turf performance by using continually improving technologies, managers provide the supervision employees require to excel by continually improving their understanding. Great supervisors provide a work environment where their employees can succeed. They provide direction, encouragement, coaching and support to enable success, and don't simply expect compliance.

The power of creating a success-oriented work environment was evident in these Webinar discussions. Increased training and coaching (including explaining why) and greater positive feedback and trust created opportunities for managers and employees to increase performance and gain greater satisfaction from the job.

**6 Informal coaching**  
My final suggestion is a bit more proactive but informal. I've had great success learning what employees are thinking and feeling asking the following two questions:

1. What's going great?
2. What could be better?

In combination, and when asked informally and genuinely, these two questions can elicit successes, ideas, concerns and insights you can use to develop an improved supervisory relationship and improved course performance.

The two-question coaching sessions can be individual or with your staff. They also serve as a great component of performance management (see my March column, page 16), performance appraisals and staff meetings.

Just as your greens and fairways require fertilization and protection from pests, your maintenance staff requires your coaching and support. **GC1**





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## HIRING A GOOD TECHNICIAN

In our industry, it's common hear that it's difficult to find a good technician.

Well, what makes a good technician? How do you know if you're interviewing one? How do you keep them? Answers to these questions might help you find the technician you've been looking for.

**So what makes a good technician?** The answer to the question depends on your operation. You want to look for someone who's well rounded and has skills in many areas, from fabrication and electrical to reel set-up and hydraulics. While many technicians are better in some areas than others, one common trait among good technicians is their desire to learn. A good technician isn't one who thinks he knows it all. Rather, he's the one attending seminars or classes to refine what he already might know. He's also the guy who doesn't have to prove how good he is because everyone knows it.

Good technicians won't always come from colleges or trade schools and won't always be the guy from one of the top 100 clubs. Top technicians come from everywhere, but they all have one thing in common: a passion for what they do. They love the job, and you can tell.

**How do you know if you're interviewing a good technician?** You can tell by his appearance and attitude during the interview. Many want to know about the budget, equipment, hours of operation, expectations, salary and benefits. Technicians want to know about these things because when they come in for the interview, they look at the facility, figure out what changes need to be made, how much time it would take, what equipment is there and how old it is, if the tools to do the job are there and how the golf course looks.

The rest of their questions will determine whether they're interested. These individuals know what it takes to manage a facility and need to make sure the operation has what it needs to make the changes and implement the systems they use to

manage the operation effectively and be successful. Every technician manages a different way so thinking you need a huge budget, while it helps, doesn't push technicians away. More times than not, personality is the deciding factor for a technician. If someone doesn't feel he could get along with you in an interview, he'll rarely make the decision to join you.

Technicians, like everyone else, spend at least 45 hours a week at work. When you figure the time individuals sleep and spend driving to work, you realize they spend about 16 hours a week at home with their family. So getting a job where you're going to be happy is crucial and needs to be a well-thought-out decision no matter what your profession.



**How do you keep them?** Technicians have a difficult time leaving a place where they feel valued. When you feel valued and a position opens, you eventually question yourself and ask, "Will I work more hours," "Will they be flexible with my time off," "Will I get the same perks," and "Will it really benefit me to go." Normally, the answer is it's better to stay. There are some cases in which it won't matter how good of a boss you are and what perks someone has. There always will be places that pay more

money and offer more things. There always will be those technicians who want to move up in the industry and move on to a bigger course.

When it comes to your relationship with your technician, the biggest thing is communication. Encourage technicians to attend seminars and more training. Ask their opinion about subjects instead of telling them. Call them occasionally, and tell them how good the greens and fairways look. Discuss topics that don't involve equipment, such as turf, diseases, fishing, etc. Try to plan cultural practices the week before to give them time to prepare. Finally, go out in the facility and learn something. Let them teach you about what they're doing and how they do it. Not only does this help you understand how good the technician is, but it helps them learn how to teach others to do what they're doing.

One of the biggest factors in finding a qualified technician for Nick von Hofen, golf course superintendent at The Ritz-Carlton Members Golf Club in Bradenton, Fla., is word of mouth.

"Our industry has been using this for years, and if there's one thing you can normally count on, it's a good recommendation," von Hofen says. "When interviewing people, I try to get a sense of how they present themselves from personal appearance to professional attitude. After all, they'll be communicating with members and guests. An environment in which individuals can do what they do best every day is a recipe for success. Hiring a technician is by no means an easy task. At different levels of my career, I've seen the frustration a technician goes through when there's a breakdown in communication. Asking for feedback and suggestions from my technician has proven to be successful."

While finding and retaining an equipment technician is no easy task, the biggest factor in all of this is communication with them, from the time they interview until they leave. If you can do that, you might be surprised how long a technician stays with you and the line at the door the next time you're looking to fill the position. **GCI**