

AVOIDING LABOR PROBLEMS: LABOR RELATIONS AND THE GOLF CLUB PART I



Successful labor relations in the golf industry, as in other industries, results from intelligent planning with clearly defined goals. Probably most club managers, superintendents, golf professionals or club officials have thought about what they would do to meet the attempt of a union takeover. A passing thought, however, won't prepare the club for the intricacies of a union drive.

WHY A UNION?

Employees choose unions because

This first part explores the major causes of employee discontent and how the employer can avoid a union organizing drive at his course

by THOMAS P. BURKE

something—wages, hours of work, or conditions of employment—dissatisfies them. Recently I discussed this very problem with a golf course superintendent whose employees

were actively seeking union representation.

He angrily asked me, "If they feel this is such a bad place to work, why don't they leave and get other jobs?"

The answer is that employees feel they have a right to their employment and have no intention of leaving. More important, the Federal law and most state laws recognize their right to organize collectively and bargain to improve their working conditions without employer interference.

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This superintendent might have avoided the union problem, if he had shown interest in his employees' working conditions before the union drive. Solutions then are not always complicated or difficult to achieve.

One employer, for example, has never experienced an organizing drive even though he is located in a predominantly unionized area. His situation did not merely happen. He learned that some employees thought their medical coverage was inadequate. Instead of angrily retorting, he took the time to explain the plan to all his workers. The medical plan was adequate; the employees just didn't understand the benefits offered. That employer eliminated discontent because his employees appreciated honest communication.

Although communicating with employees is important it is not enough. A manager must establish and maintain working conditions that will not force his employees to seek a union.

What conditions are important? Why not take a page out of an AFL-CIO publication designed to aid union organizers by showing them the reasons why employees choose unions?

If you understand these areas of discontent, you can eliminate some major problems. These

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guidelines did not originate with the AFL-CIO. They are the same factors that any labor relations expert knows cause dissatisfaction among employees.

The trained union organizer looks for 1) inadequate or unfair wage rates; 2) inadequate benefits;

3) poor supervision and lack of communication (unfair and unevenly applied discipline and favoritism), and 4) lack of job security.

Take a look at the following categories and compare them to your employee policies. Do you see areas that might be improved?

INADEQUATE WAGE RATES

The assumption is made by many that most union organizing drives succeed because they promise higher wages. Although over-simplified, this idea is the spur that starts many union organizing drives. A golf club employee easily becomes dissatisfied with his wages if he hears of a union in another industry that bargained substantial wage increases.

Obviously, the golf club cannot pay the same wages that are paid in, for example, the construction industry. What should you do? Talk to your employees and explain the club's wage policy. To do this, you need a set policy, not a hit or miss approach. And if you pay the lowest wages possible, you can expect trouble.

Many golf clubs have adopted a sound policy of paying wages equivalent to the so-called "going rate," which is determined by surveying the wage policies of other club employers with similar job classifications.

This survey need not be limited to local golf clubs; it could also include similar types of work in other industries. But it should cover union as well as nonunion employees. Obviously, it does no good to be on the same wage level as a nonunion golf club, if a nearby golf club has a union contract providing substantially greater wage rates. A union organizer would not waste much time pointing out this fact to employees.

One West Coast nonunion golf club tailors its wage policies to those of a unionized neighboring golf club. This policy has been communicated fully to the employees. To date, they have shown no inter-

est in organizing any union.

Simply to implement area wage practices is not enough, though. It is equally important to tell the employee the amount of his or her increase and the basis of the increase. An employee will be more satisfied with the wage rate if he or she

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knows it is fair in relation to other employees who perform the same or similar job in other companies or golf clubs.

The club might also avoid the so-called "merit" increase for select employees. All employees performing satisfactorily should share, if an increase is given. If an employee's work is not satisfactory, give him or her a chance to improve for 90 days. If the work improves, grant the raise. If not, consider replacing him or her with someone else. Disparate wage rates for employees of substantially equal performance is a source of employee friction.

INADEQUATE BENEFITS

The term benefits includes vacation policy, holidays, medical benefits, pension plans, sick leave and many others. A number of miscellaneous types of benefits are a product of highly-sophisticated collective bargaining in well-established bargaining relationships. These should not concern the management of the average golf club. Basic benefits should be developed first. How should these benefits be developed?

Start with the employees and learn what concerns them most. One or two employees who have experienced large medical bills can easily convince the others that a bet-

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ter medical plan is needed and a union would help the employees receive such a plan.

As with wages, look at the benefits offered by other local clubs. Look at the benefits offered by other industries employing similar employee classifications. There are also general guidelines that can be followed. Of all the major benefits, employees generally consider medical insurance the most important.

Benefits should also be tailored to the peculiar needs of the golf club. A club on the West Coast, for example, might employ a full staff the year around. The employees there may be interested in long-

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term benefits, such as pension plans or increased vacations. In areas subject to seasonal changes, many employees have a relatively improved short work period and may be more interested in short-term benefits, such as greater medical coverage or higher wages as a substitute for benefits.

In either situation, employee communication is essential.

The manager or superintendent should know his employees' attitudes. He should know if the employee feels that the benefits are inadequate. If so, then the manager or superintendent should try to improve that benefit or honestly and convincingly explain why it cannot be granted.

Communication cannot be underestimated. Many union organizing drives begin because management has not explained company policies. Two years ago a club manager was mystified when his normally satisfied employees turned to a union. To his dismay he

learned that the employees had been told that their medical insurance was no good. Upon investigation the manager learned that his plan was one of the best in the area, but his explanations to the employees came too late to be persuasive.

INADEQUATE SUPERVISION

In my opinion more organizing drives start because of inadequate or unfair supervision than any other single source. Employees must be treated with the respect owed them as human beings. A supervisor who cannot establish mutual respect between himself and his employees will create employee discontent, which can lead not only to a union, but to all-around poor performance. Supervisors should be instructed to communicate with employees, to be sympathetic to employee problems, and to be firm, but fair, in ensuring that the employees perform their assigned tasks.

A major test of a supervisor is his manner of administering discipline: Is it consistent? Is it fair? Discipline should never be applied in anger or without good reason. Employees are sensitive to any unfair treatment; it creates hostility and job insecurity.

One way to ensure fair and consistent discipline is to establish work rules. Then employees know what is expected of them. Work rules should be well-known to everyone and should include policies toward hours, tardiness, absenteeism and the like. The rules must be uniformly enforced. If one employee is continually allowed to report late without reproach, and a month later, is discharged, the employees will not know what to expect or what is expected of them. If you establish clear cut policies and stick to them, employees will have a much more favorable impression than discipline unevenly applied.

Avoid favoritism. Don't discipline one employee for lateness and look the other way for another.

An employee who performs the same work as other employees yet receives better pay, better working hours or more even-handed treatment creates bitterness among other employees. This unequal treatment can cause the employees to seek an equalizer in the form of a union to ensure that all wages, hours and working conditions are uniform, or at least fairly and uniformly applied.

LACK OF JOB SECURITY

Job security to the employee simply means that the employee can reasonably expect his job to continue. An employee who feels that he might be immediately discharged if he gets on the wrong side of the supervisor often feels he needs union protection. Then he can be discharged for good cause only. He also feels that the good cause can be tested by a grievance procedure up to and including a decision of a third-party neutral arbitrator who will decide the case, not on the employer's principle, but on general principles of labor law.

Lack of job security is not created by known seasonal layoffs, because employees can plan for that and usually have some assurance of a job next season. It results from the unexpected discharge or fear of unfair treatment by a supervisor.

In Part One, I have explored why employees turn to unions and how the golf club can satisfy employee needs. In Part Two, I will discuss the legal requirements, problems and tactics of both club and union during a union organization at a club. □

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