The Good, the Bad And the Reality

BY JOEL JACKSON

If you want controversy, let's talk about management companies. In today's tight job market, nothing can polarize superintendents like discussing them. What's all the fuss about? It starts with progressives jumping on the bandwagon, and traditionalists crying foul.

But it boils down to change. Corporate thinking has permeated the golf courses of America: mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, team building, consolidation, diversification, empowerment, taking risks, thinking out of the box and changing the paradigm. That makes the golf course industry fertile ground for management companies.

But let's put all of this hullabaloo in perspective. I asked an executive of a national management company what percentage of U.S. courses were owned or operated by management companies. His guesstimate was 10 percent — about 1,600 of the nation's estimated 16,000 courses, according to my calculations.

The executive said only 50 percent of the remaining courses might fit into a management company's profile. I know that doesn't ease the pain for superintendents and golf pros who have lost jobs and vendors who have lost accounts. Loyalty in corporate America is only skin deep, and only people with thick skins survive.

Lawsuits, environmental rules, OSHA regulations, wage and hour laws and competition with the club down the street are making lax golf course operations obsolete. Many golf clubs need to be more structured and run like businesses to compete. A strong, savvy club can stay independent and profitable, but reality suggests that those kind of dreamers and doers are the minority.

Given the right set of circumstances, management companies are simply a sign of the changing times. They are large and small and come in all flavors. Some keep to the high road by building good reputations and are decent companies to work for. Others take the low road to quick profits, and people get hurt in the process.

People talk about how these companies solicit new clients, but I often get calls from companies offering me the chance to switch my long-distance carrier, insurance services and brokerage services. It's called competition — and yes, it's fierce.

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It might make life easier if some of our golf associations pulled together to track or rate management companies, similar to what the Better Business Bureau does. Then, shady operators or companies that get lots of performance complaints could be identified.

But remember: Superintendents never have guaranteed jobs, no matter who their employers are. I've known more superintendents fired by their clubs than by management companies. These dismissals range from personality clashes, club politics, course conditions and poor communications to near-sighted, cost-cutting measures. Trying to figure out superintendent job changes is like choosing between doors No. 1, 2 and 3. You don't always know the facts.

Management company superintendents commonly note several pros and cons. While they cite loss of autonomy in making decisions as the biggest drawback, they like the secure feeling of belonging to a larger organization.

Mandatory paperwork and meetings may be aggravating to some, but others like the fact that there's more continuity and written standards than operating under an ever-changing greens committee or an eccentric owner.

Loners and maverick personalities find it hard to merge into team player roles with several layers of management. Others like the fact that they have backup support and built-in resources.

Then there are those superintendents who never got support from their clubs for continuing education and professional associations. Most reputable management companies promote education and participation.

I call it a coin toss. You can badmouth management companies if you want, but don't paint them all with the same brush.

Joel Jackson, CGCS, retired from Disney's golf division in 1997 and is now director of communications for the Florida GCSA.