

What happens when the ladder to success conflicts with time-honored professional ethics?

Matt Shaffer knows all about the ethics that surround the hiring of a superintendent. The current superintendent of The Country Club in Pepper Pike, Ohio, Shaffer once interviewed intensely for a post he refers to as his

dream job. The deal was done, and all he had to do was sign on the dotted line.

Before signing, Shaffer asked his future employers if he could talk to the superintendent to get a feel for current course maintenance practices. The owners balked, and they requested Shaffer not involve their current superintendent in any discussions about the course. Their caginess made Shaffer wonder what was going on. Eventually, those doubts forced him to make a painful decision.

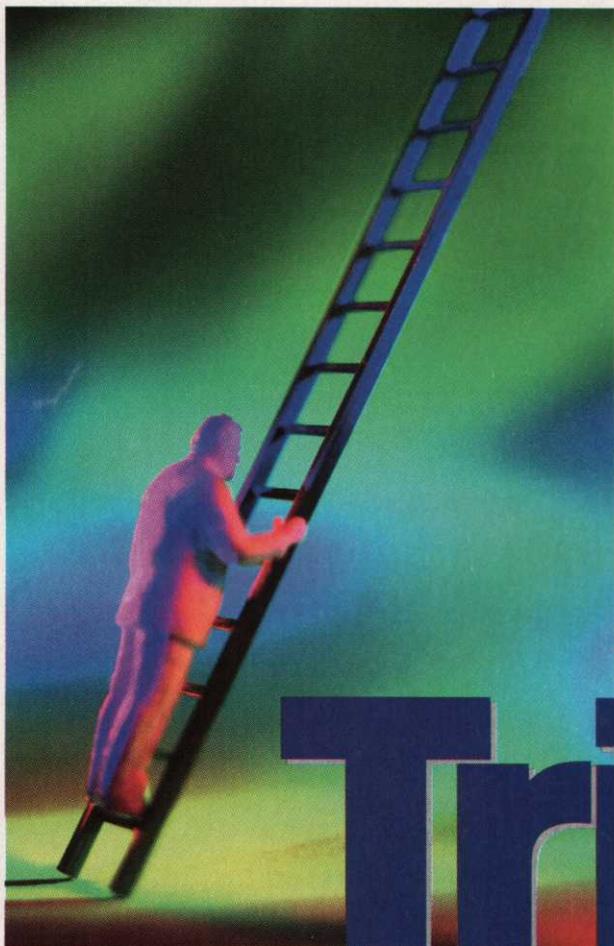
“It was clear they hadn’t told their current superintendent that he had been fired,” Shaffer says.

“It hurt a lot to turn down that job — I really wanted to take it and my wife really thought I should take it — but I had to tell the owners I couldn’t take the job under those circumstances.”

Shaffer says his decision, difficult though it was, prevented him from doing something he would have regretted later.

As the job market increases in competitiveness, particularly at the superintendent’s level, ethical questions shift from the theoretical realm to the practical. Pressures on superintendents

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., ASSOCIATE EDITOR



When the Climb Gets Tricky

anxious to move to higher positions mount as more people become available to jockey for jobs, and the pressure elevates the temptation to behave unethically.

“The majority of superintendents I’ve worked with adhere to the code of ethics set down by the GCSAA,” says Michelle Frazier, superintendent of Boston Hills CC in Boston Hills, Ohio. “You hear stories, however, of people who push the bounds. In this industry, behaving badly is not the best policy.”

Frazier, who is also the director of communications for the Northern Ohio Golf Course Superintendent’s Association, says those who believe anything goes in the hiring process will find it hard going once they enter the market.

“This is a profession whose strength lies in the willingness of your colleagues to help you,” Frazier says. “If you don’t have that support, it’s really hard to make headway into the business.”

But fear drives people to do things they wouldn’t normally do. With the job market growing ever tighter, superintendents worry not only about moving up in the hierarchy, but losing their jobs to youngsters fresh out of college. College degrees look awfully appealing to owners, and a student fresh out of college will often come cheaper than a superintendent with years of experience.

“There are fewer jobs and more people clamoring to get them,” says Darren Davis, superintendent at Olde Florida CC in Naples, Fla. “It’s not surprising that there’s a lot of fear out there, but that’s no excuse for breaking the rules.”

Rules that, for Davis, include:

- never accepting a consulting job from a club without letting the current superintendent know;
- never talking badly about a colleague behind his back; and
- never undercutting another person’s salary just to be hired.

These rules prevent the golf industry from becoming a dog-eat-dog industry, as so many other businesses have become, Davis says.

“People coming into the industry have to understand that every time they don’t behave in an honorable manner, they do a disservice to the profession and hurt themselves in the process,” Davis says. “If I find out that someone has behaved badly, it’s my obligation — it’s any superintendent’s obligation — to let that person know he or she has done something wrong.”

Although superintendents often blame the erosion of standards on the influx of students entering the industry, George Hamilton says veteran superintendents themselves play a role as well. Hamilton, a senior lecturer at Penn State University, blames rising expectations for creating a more competitive market.

In the past, Hamilton says, there were fewer people qualified to take superintendent’s positions. As the requirements for other jobs — spray technicians, mechanics and even crew members — have risen, people in those positions can now also qualify for superintendent positions because they are far better educated than in the past. That creates a situation where more people are willing to do about anything to get a job.

“Whenever I hear a superintendent blame those of us in the turf schools for flooding the market, I have to laugh,” Hamilton says.

Shaffer agrees.

“If I hear another one of my colleagues whine about the fact that all these kids are coming in and stealing our jobs, I’m going to scream,” Shaffer says. “If you don’t like the place where you’re working, then leave. Golf is no different from any other industry. It’s a business.”

Solving an Ethical Dilemma

George Hamilton, senior lecturer at Penn State University, has spent 24 years in the golf industry. His father was a golf professional and a superintendent, so he has watched ethical considerations increasingly take a backseat to getting — or keeping — a job.

Hamilton believes he has at least a partial solution: Create standards that channel turf management students through the system on a track, rather than letting anyone with a turf degree compete for a superintendent’s job.

“What you need to do is give students a clear career path,” Hamilton says. “We need to clarify positions and titles and make clear what’s necessary to do each.”

For example, Hamilton says a student who starts as a crew leader would then have to receive a specific set of qualifications to move up to a spray technician’s position.

To move up to an assistant superintendent’s job, the spray technician would have to get another set of specific experience before he or she could move up again. Eventually, the student will have gained enough experience to compete for a superintendent’s job, but it will give him or her a broader wealth of experience from which to draw.

“This system is fair for everyone,” Hamilton says. “It creates a specific track that allows people to move up in the hierarchy, while still forcing people to earn each level. With the number of people competing for superintendent’s positions reduced, you’ll see far less unethical behavior.”

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"I would also remind superintendents that the people who own the clubs come from a business world and they're used to running things their way," he says. "Some of the things we consider unethical are par for the course in other industries."

As dire as the situation seems to some, not everyone believes the ethics of the profession have turned for the worse. Dick Kopplin, president of Kopplin Search, a La Quinta, Calif.-based employment search that specializes in the golf industry, feels ethics are still an important consideration for the superintendents he has worked with.

"I've been involved in this industry for a long time, and I don't think the overall ethical standards have changed that much," Kopplin says. "Ethics have been — and always will be — a personal choice."

Headhunters often take heat for weakening the bonds that keep superintendents from preying on each other, but Kopplin defends the profession.

"If you're a reputable search firm, you can't afford to do anything unethical," Kopplin says. "It will ruin your reputation. I'm selective about which clubs and superintendents I represent, and I research the history of everyone so I don't get burned."

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In 1998, the average base salary for superintendents was \$53,205, according to GCSAA.

GCSAA's Code of Ethics (excerpts)

- Maintain the highest standards of personal conduct to reflect positively upon and add to the stature of the profession of golf course management and refrain from any act tending to promote my own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession of golf course management, the GCSAA, or a fellow superintendent.
- Recognize and observe the highest standards of integrity in my relationships with fellow superintendents and others associated with this profession and industry.
- Abstain from making false or untrue statements concerning another superintendent or causing public embarrassment to another superintendent.
- Abstain from applying for or otherwise seeking employment in an unprofessional manner. For the purpose of this section of the code, a member seeks employment in an unprofessional manner if he or she does one or more of the following in connection with the prospective employment:
 - a) provides false or misleading information to a prospective employer;
 - b) makes slanderous or defamatory statements concerning a fellow superintendent;
 - c) attempts to undermine or improperly influence the staff of a fellow superintendent;
 - d) attempts to deceive, mislead or misinform a fellow superintendent's employer, supervisor or fellow employees;
 - e) makes misleading, deceptive or false statements or claims about his or her professional qualifications, experience or performance; or
 - f) makes misleading, deceptive or false statements or claims about a member superintendent's professional qualifications, experience or performance.
- Refrain from accepting employment, as a consultant, in an unprofessional manner. For the purposes of this section of the code, a consultant accepts employment in an unprofessional manner if he or she does one or more of the following in connection with such consulting:
 - a) provides false or misleading information to a prospective employer;
 - b) makes slanderous or defamatory statements concerning a fellow superintendent;
 - c) attempts to undermine or improperly influence the staff of a fellow superintendent;
 - d) attempts to deceive, mislead or misinform a fellow superintendent's employer, supervisor or fellow employees;
 - e) makes misleading, deceptive or false statements or claims about his or her professional qualifications, experience or performance; or
 - f) makes misleading, deceptive or false statements or claims about a fellow superintendent's professional qualifications, experience or performance.



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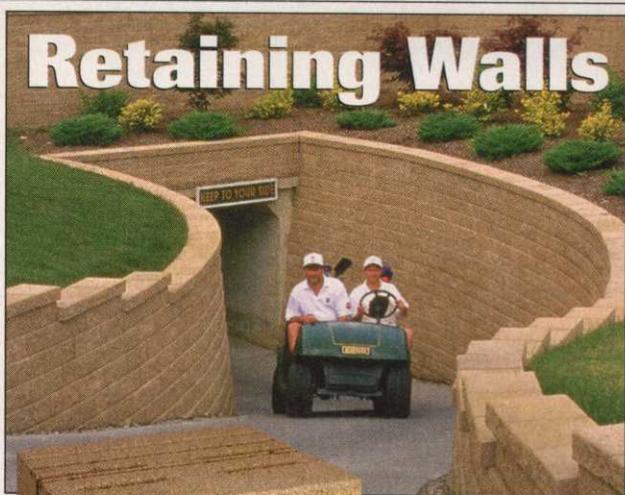


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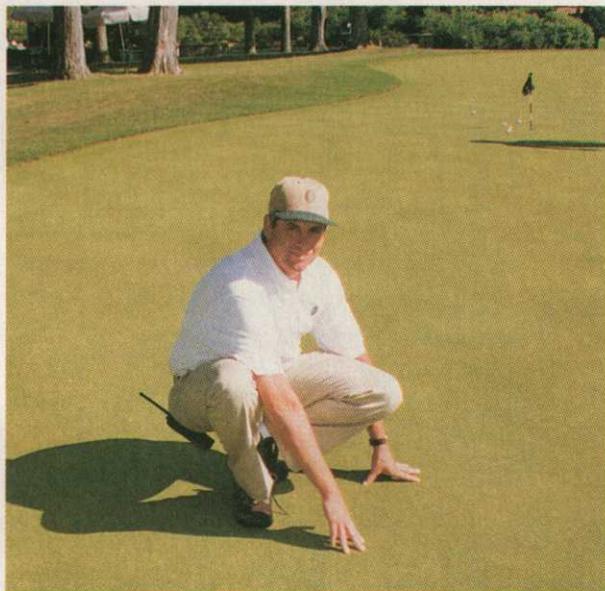


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MATT SHAFFER, SUPERINTENDENT,
THE COUNTRY CLUB

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Davis says headhunters are in the industry to stay, and that they're important in a flooded market.

"High-level clubs receive 1,000 resumes every time they have a job opening," Davis says. "I can't blame them for including a search firm to help them pare down the field."

Hamilton says owners also bear some responsibility for the breakdown in ethics because of the manner in which they choose superintendents. In the past, when a job came open, owners would advertise it so superintendents looking to move up could apply.

Now, the system is far more closed, which often leaves superintendents little choice but to sneak around. But Hamilton has a simple way for superintendents to tell whether they're acting unethically.

"If you have to ask yourself whether you're acting ethically or not, you're probably not," Hamilton says. "It's an almost foolproof way to tell, and it will save you a lot of grief in the long run." ■