

Every morning holds the opportunity to work out of the center of a shiny new box, roomy and spacious, with plenty of open windows. For some greenkeepers (I use the term “greenkeepers” out of respect for tradition), this box remains comfortable all day long. Everything seems to be at your disposal so you can easily handle whatever challenge is thrown your way. The windows always stay clean and open, cared for by the 20 or so window washers that make up your staff. Answers to questions never seem out of reach.

In fact, there are some situations where you never have to go outside the comfort of the box.

Dues are paid every month, so needs and budgets go hand-in-hand. Even operating hours are set in stone, eliminating early-morning surprises by dew sweepers and unannounced outings. It's life on Easy Street to some extent.

For other greenkeepers however, life is very different. Oh sure, we wake up in the center of the same new shiny box, but as the day goes on the box becomes drastically different, metamorphosing from a place of cozy comfort into a veritable holding cell.

Our well-thought-out plans for the day go awry, and all of the sudden things aren't looking good for the home-team.

This is when we suddenly realize that if we remain inside the box we'll be crushed by the dreaded Hands-Tied-Behind-Your-Back Syndrome and the day's plan will be lost.

Little by little, the walls start closing in and the windows begin slamming shut. For example:

- You need to spray greens, but two groups have been given the green light to start before the clubhouse opens ... slam!

- A 4-inch main has let go and shut the pumps down, so sprinklers on the tees didn't run to water in the high-nitrogen fertilizer you put down yesterday evening ... slam!

- Two people have called in sick this morning, cutting your staff by 20 percent ... slam!

This looks like a job for ... Outside-the-Box-Man! Ducking into the nearest porta-potty for some privacy and a quick 10-count to gather your thoughts, you emerge victorious with a new plan in one hand, crushed box in the other, knowing full well that all is not lost and the creativity of thinking outside the box will prevail.

When It's Time to Get Out of the Box

BY JIM BLACK



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Against all forces of box logic, you send the mechanic out to spray greens and have your tee-mowing guy help mow greens instead to keep ahead of the spraying mechanic. Meanwhile, you pull one of your fairway mowing guys to help change cups on the back because you didn't know about the 16-man shotgun (“Oh, it was only a small group. I didn't think you needed to know about them.”)

Now the only guy you have left to handle today's surprise irrigation break is the one you hired yesterday to rake bunkers. “I know it's hard to shovel mud. Be careful of the wires, I'll be back in a minute.”

Back to the barn you race to assess the puddle of hydraulic fluid under the rough unit. Wishing your mechanic was actually two people, you grab an adjustable wrench and tighten down on a couple of dripping connections in hopes that you can get some of the north forty cut before lunch and the impending afternoon thunderstorm.

Whew. Now that you have your entire crew out the door, you can go jump on the other fairway unit for a little peace and quiet.

I must say that, among the choices of solutions to the myriad of challenges that greenkeepers face, I've never counted filling in blank checks or ordering up a shiny new fleet of turf equipment to be among the most creative. (I will give creative credit, however, to the ability to convince board and committee members to give you the blank check in the first place.)

What is creative is facing a challenge head on using only what you already have to work with. No one does this as well as the greenkeeper and crew at a public course.

The key to opening up that creative vault is to think outside the box.

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