

# CONFLICT Resolution

Fighting and frustration can actually be channeled into positive outcomes. It's just a matter of learning the proper skills

By Becky Mollenkamp

**C**onflict at a golf course is as common as the two-putt. Whether between employees, with a customer or among management, dealing with conflict is a routine part of a superintendent's job. And "it's not a fun part of the job," says Michael Nelson, superintendent of Dacotah Ridge Golf Course in Morton, Minn.

Believe it or not, fighting and frustration can actually be channeled into positive outcomes. All it takes is a good understanding of what conflict is, how it starts and how to address it. Unfortunately, many managers never learn the skills needed to handle negative situations properly.

"Most people think of conflict as a bad thing because they don't know how to [handle] it," says Barbara Pachter, author of *The Power of Positive Confrontation* (Marlowe & Company, 2001). "If you know what to do, you're bound to have a better outcome."

Simply put, conflict is an opposition of ideas: it can be constructive or destructive. In fact, the Chinese pictogram for conflict has two distinct elements — one meaning danger and the other meaning opportunity. The form conflict takes is up to the people involved.

Many managers succumb to the temptation to avoid conflict, including James Bade, superintendent of Somerset Country Club in St. Paul, Minn. A self-proclaimed "people

pleaser," Bade says dealing with drama is his least favorite part of the job.

"Can't we all just get along?" Bade jokes. "I often procrastinate when it comes to solving conflict. I try to avoid it, but that doesn't work. It can keep me awake at night. I tend to internalize conflict, which is not a very good thing. It gets pent up inside, waiting to explode."

As Bade has learned, unresolved conflict can lead to negative confrontation, including verbal or physical fights.

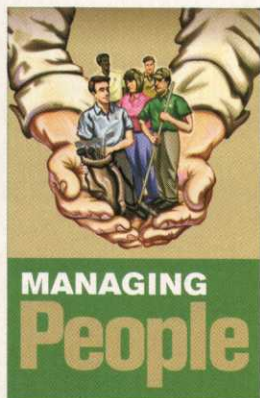
"Avoidance may seem easier initially until the situation gets so bad that it can't be avoided," Pachter says. "The biggest mistake managers make is not knowing there is an alternative to avoiding. They can avoid or confront aggressively or the third alternative is positive confrontation."

Instead of looking at conflict as a win-lose situation, managers need to learn how to create win-win solutions. To do that, managers must understand that conflict is not an obstacle to organizational progress; it is actually the key to moving forward.

"Progress is really a result of conflict resolution," says Robert Milligan, author of *Human Resource Management for Golf Course Superintendents* (GCSAA, 2002). "Can you have change without conflict? No. It's not hard to make a decision if you have only one option, but if you have more than one then there's conflict."

## When employees fight

The most common source of conflict for any business is squabbles among the staff. As every







superintendent knows, golf course crews can fight about anything and everything — language barriers that lead to miscommunication, debates over work ethic or job assignments, even allegations of tool theft.

This is one time when avoiding may be the best response to conflict. Minor problems should be left to the employees to hash out among themselves.

“Chances are, you shouldn’t intervene,” Pachter says. “Just keep throwing it back to them. If they really can’t resolve it, you may want to bring them together and help resolve it.”

When a manager must step in and guide conflict resolution, there are four methods (besides avoiding) he or she can use. “Tailor your response to the situation,” Milligan advises.

■ **Competing:** The most-assertive and least-cooperative style, competing means meeting one’s own needs at the expense of the other

party’s. Sounds awful? Actually, this method is a must when your way is the only correct solution, such as issues of safety or potential legal problems for the business.

■ **Accommodating:** At the opposite end of the spectrum from competing, accommodation means placing the other party’s needs above one’s own. This method can leave a manager feeling resentful, but it can be beneficial during a conflict with an employee because it helps build rapport and trust.

■ **Collaborating:** By being both cooperative and assertive, managers can collaborate to satisfy the needs of both parties in a dispute. This style takes time and energy, but it is the best style to use when it is essential that both parties agree on a resolution.

■ **Compromising:** When collaboration fails, managers may need to compromise to find a

James Bade (right), superintendent of Somerset Country Club, confers with the golf course’s green chairman, Terry Glarner. It’s important to educate members and golfers about what you’re trying to accomplish, Bade says.

COURTESY OF SOMERSET COUNTRY CLUB

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solution that at least partially deals with both parties' concerns.

"Sometimes you have to use multiple styles," Milligan says. "You have to be assertive to get them to resolve the issue. Once they agree to do that, you become more collaborative or even accommodating to build goodwill for the next time there is conflict."

When a superintendent gets involved in an employee conflict, the most important first step is to listen. The dispute at hand is usually just a superficial symptom of a much deeper and long-standing problem. The manager's job is to play detective and uncover the root causes, Milligan says. Don't make the common mistake of responding only to the triggering event.

"The key is to listen to your employees and acknowledge their feelings," Nelson says. "Often, the offending employee is unaware of the conflict. By listening intently first and then talking, you are able to get to the root of the problem."

Be sensitive to language barriers. If you have non-English speakers, find helpful ways to address their conflict. Glenn Perry, certified superintendent at Rolling Hills Country Club in Wilton, Conn., has a mostly Spanish-speaking staff. He is not fluent in Spanish so he uses an interpreter to help him resolve employee disputes.

"To solve the conflict, I go to each party separately with a senior staff member to explain the situation to me," Perry says. "I talk it over with each party and come up with a solution. By continuing to work together, the conflict usually gets resolved."

#### **You're the boss**

The dynamics of dispute change when the battle is between employer and employee. There is an unavoidable power struggle in these situations, so they must be handled delicately.

"You come with an unequal power play because you can say, 'No,'" Pachter says. "Rank has its privileges, and that's the way it should be. But if you want to be a good boss, you need to hear what your employees have to say and not assume you are always right."

Common sources of manager-employee conflict include employees who break company policy (absenteeism, tardiness, excessive breaks),

employee concerns about fairness (job scheduling, pay equity, favoritism), and communication problems between boss and employee.

When you have a problem with an employee, don't wait to address it. The longer it festers, the more frustrated you will get and the more strained your relationship with the employee becomes. Don't expect the employee to come to you or to even be aware there is a problem.

Pull the employee aside; don't confront him or her in front of others. Wait until you are calm and the employee is not in the middle of a task.

"Keep things professional, not personal," Milligan says. "Never use 'you' statements, like 'you are wrong' or 'you make me mad.' Keep the focus on the issue, not on the person."

Likewise, maintain an open-door policy for those times when an employee has a problem with you.

"I encourage my employees to come to me with any problems they encounter on the job," Nelson says. "If it involves me, I would like to hear about it. I'm not perfect, and I would like to listen to him if an employee feels he has a problem."

Nelson has it right — listening is the key. Do not get defensive, but do ask for clarification so you understand the complaint. Acknowledge the person's feelings and do your best to explain the situation or fix the problem.

Confrontation may be difficult and uncomfortable, but it can lead to good results, especially when handled with tact.

"Usually, it only affects the relationship in a positive way when the misunderstanding has been cleared up," Perry says. "It is not a good idea to harbor grudges because the employees are ultimately your best resource and control the outcome of the final product."

Giving employees the power of confrontation (even against you) is not the same as turning over your authority as the boss.

"Most of our intuition is that there is a limited amount of power," Milligan says. "If I give you some power, I have less. Managers have to get past that. Power is not limited. One thing that leads to immediate failure is too little self-confidence in your ability to deal with conflict. These are learnable skills. We can't all be Tiger Woods, but we can all be

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better golfers. It's the same with these skills.”

Milligan suggests taking classes or attending seminars on conflict. Also, superintendents can find confidants in superintendents from other towns, and call them up and discuss these issues as they arise. Sometimes you just need someone to confirm that you are doing the right thing, Milligan adds.

#### Peer problems

Another stressful situation for a superintendent is when he or she has conflict with a peer, boss or customer. When you can't fire the source of stress, how do you deal with it?

Last fall, one of Perry's peers was playing in a charity event at his club. The weather was inclement and the course was unplayable so the outing was canceled. The visiting superintendent demanded to know who was in charge. Perry was off-site so his assistant dealt with the angry man. The superintendent demanded to see proof of the course's condition and, when Perry's assistant showed him the puddles, he became rude and made inappropriate comments.

“I wish I could have handled the situation immediately, but instead I investigated and then made a phone call to him the next morning,” Perry says. “I had to call to show

that I support my assistant and the decisions he makes when I am not on the property. After listening to him and explaining my objections, he apologized.”

Superintendents have two types of power at their disposal, Milligan says. There is the formal power that gives them authority over their employees, and there are informal powers that they can use to influence people over whom they have no authority. Examples of informal powers include charisma, positive feedback and expertise.

Although Perry had no formal power over his offending peer, he got the apology because the facts were on his side and he approached his peer with confidence but without arrogance.

“Supervisors should strive to use informal power because people resent formal power,” Milligan says. “We ought to be leading by our ability to influence people with informal power.”

And when the conflict is with a customer? They are always right, aren't they?

“The customer is always right, but there is a line that can be crossed,” Pachter says.

Like when the golfer verbally attacked one of Nelson's staff members because the course was being aerated. When Nelson confronted the member, he denied saying anything and called the staffer a liar. “I almost blew a gasket, but had enough sense to just walk away,” Nelson says.

That was the smart move. Although it is OK to let a member know his or her behavior is not acceptable, the best bet is to simply walk away if someone is screaming or out of control.

“Golf course managers often have as many customers as members,” Bade says. “I tell myself that it is their golf course and they pay the bills. But sometimes it is a matter of educating them about goals and what you are trying to accomplish.”

Perry does his best to eliminate membership conflict before it begins with active communication through newsletters, the club's Web site, bulletin boards, and daily personal appearances on the first tee, in the pro shop and clubhouse.

“By being available, approachable and forward-thinking, most conflict can be stopped with intelligent responses before it starts,” he says. ■

#### Grace Under Fire

When conflict leads to confrontation, things can get ugly. It's particularly difficult when you are on the receiving end of a verbal attack. When the tirade comes as a surprise, it's easy to get thrown off balance and say or do things you'll later regret.

If you are prepared to handle such a situation, it's easier to remain composed and act appropriately. Follow these guidelines from Barbara Pachter, the author of *The Power of Positive Confrontation* (Marlowe & Company, 2001), the next time an employee, customer or peer puts you on the defensive:

- **Agree:** Agree with what the person says but add additional information that turns the comment around, such as, “You're right. We did spend a lot of money because it's important to our customers.”

- **Clarify:** Ask questions to get more information. “Why are you saying that?” “Tell me more about your concern.” Probing makes you less likely to appear wounded, and it buys you time to calm down.

- **Acknowledge:** Reiterate what the person has said, then use *and*, not *but*, to provide clarifying information. “There may be some truth to that, and we are looking at the numbers.”

- **Disagree:** Be polite but firm. You can say, “I disagree, and here's why ...”

- **Postpone:** Sometimes it's best to talk to the person privately or at a later time. Say something like, “You obviously have strong feelings. Let's get together at the end of the day so we can discuss this issue in more depth.” ■

— Becky Mollenkamp