

As superintendents, we expect
loyalty from those under us.

But we must not expect it blindly

By Ron Furlong

PLEDGE OF

Allegiance

When I recently turned 40, I chose to celebrate the momentous life event not as a negative but as a great positive. As an opportunity. An opportunity — no, make that a right — to begin

imparting my vast arsenal of wisdom on to others. So, on a cold, windy day earlier this year I began thinking of which portion of my brain to pass on to others. There were so many choices ... so many deep caverns to explore and then release. I gave myself a headache, in fact. After a couple of aspirin and some deep breaths, I delved again into the subconscious. What did I need to say? What did I need to pass along?

I came up with one word. One simple, rather short word. But a nice word. The word is “loyalty.” So here’s my spin on it. Remember, you have to listen to me. I’m now an elder.

The Oxford English Dictionary says that loyalty “implies a faithfulness that is steadfast in the face of any temptation to renounce, desert or betray.” Unswerving allegiance, if you will.

How about this? Picture a tree; perhaps a Norway maple, a beautiful specimen sitting in the rough just off the approach on your fifth hole. Do you have it pictured? Now, ask yourself this. Could one say that a plant is loyal to its seed? Is the trunk of a tree loyal to its roots? Are the branches loyal to the trunk? And are the leaves, in turn, loyal to the branches?

Good questions, no?

There are a few other words that one tends to think of when contemplating loyalty: values, virtues, morals and ethics.

Values, in general, are those conceptions that are generally accepted in a society as desirable and which offer guidance. Virtues are the ability to behave in accordance with individual values. Morals could be described as the sum of principles that define what is ethically right or wrong, good or bad. And ethics are the study of the rules and elements of conduct that determine human behavior.

So, how is loyalty tied in with these other terms, and what in the name of all that is good am I trying to say here?

Let me start with this: I’ve been thinking a lot recently of what loyalty is and what it means. It seems like all around us, especially in the business of golf course management, loyalty is disappearing. Ethics are blurred. Virtues are fading. The phrase “dog eat dog” is becoming more apropos.

Personally, I’ve always considered loyalty to be one of the most important virtues by which I live my life. I’ve always made it a point to be loyal to my superior. No one ever taught me this. It wasn’t a class in school. It was a choice that I, at some point and certainly not consciously, made. Loyalty, however, does need to be reciprocated. Loyalty grows out of a more basic quality, which is mutual respect.



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If someone respects and values you as you respect and value them, loyalty grows and is not a negative. It can be difficult to remain loyal when trust is broken.

Here's my quick story: Years ago while working at a golf course I became aware that the superintendent was going to be fired the next day. I should not have been told this. And the person who told me should not have been told this.

The only person who should have been told this was the superintendent when he got fired. The assistant was actually told by ownership that the superintendent would be fired and he would get the job. A horribly unethical situation for all involved. I also faced the prospect that the superintendent's firing, followed by the assistant's promotion, could very well lead to my promotion to the assistant position.

Where did my loyalty lie? With the assistant, who I liked very much and was probably going to make me the next assistant? Or with the superintendent, who I actually had a bit of a strained relationship with and who would probably never promote me?

Strangely enough, I never questioned it. My loyalty lied with the superintendent. Despite the strained relationship he had with the rest of the crew and myself, he had my respect, and I believe I had his.

And of course the complete and disgusting breach of ethics gave me no choice. I called the superintendent that night and told him what I knew. After a sleepless night the frantic superintendent came in the next day and sure enough was let go. Did my warning help him at all? Probably not. But I felt it my duty to tell him.

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Perhaps keeping silent would have been the proper course of action. I don't know. But loyalty, virtues, values, morals and ethics all need to be considered. We cannot just turn a blind eye, even if it would strengthen our own position.

In the same respect, I don't feel that loyalty should be completely blind. Take the Marines, for instance. They regard the term of loyalty as: "A Marine displaying enthusiasm in carrying out an order of a senior, though he may privately disagree with it." Also, "The job has to be done. ... Always faithful. ...

You owe unswerving loyalty up and down the chain of command."

I don't think we want to go to these extremes. However, one must always remember for whom they work and what that means. I've heard too often as of late stories of lost loyalty and ethics breached. It might do us all some good to review the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's (GCSAA) Code Of Ethics from time to time. We should not only review the code, but also consider why it was created in the first place.

As superintendents, we expect loyalty from those under us. But we must not expect it blindly. Earn respect and trust. Earn loyalty.

The following are such strong words to consider from time to time — values, virtues, morals, ethics and loyalty. You should stop and consider them someday soon. And when you turn 40, you can spout off about them. It's your right.

Now, I must get back into that brain of mine and see what else I have to offer. It's awful roomy and spacious in here. I'm afraid I may have tapped the source. ■

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