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The Priority of Personnel: Why it Matters

BY MATTHEW J. WARD

Turnover and morale: The best facilities do not take them for granted. The ignorant clubs, however, take the approach that the primary emphasis is on turf maintenance — not the people doing the labor. But these out-of-sight and out-of-mind clubs do not factor in how such indifference can escalate to a far greater and more daunting challenge, as in turnover. Clearly, it's hard to fathom how much time, attention and dollars can be allocated to turf maintenance while very little of that is paid to the people doing the work.

Sometimes the work — rather than the personnel — becomes the only important issue. In such a scenario, unfortunately, it's easy for the boss to assume that everyone is on the same page when they're not. Sadly, the boss doesn't realize how corrosive his inertia to personnel

issues can be, and how his staff's resentment for his management style can quickly sap the morale and overall mission of the entire team.

Turnover in the golf course maintenance department is common. Much of a course's help is seasonal and includes high school students and college-age workers. But the issue of plummeting morale and chronic turnover isn't caused by seasonal changes in the workforce — it's prompted by an environment that fails to provide a range of communication tools. Hence, any facility that fosters a high dosage of turnover among its critical personnel will invariably see a steady erosion of trust. Then the desire for workers to give extra effort in all aspects of the operation can also be jeopardized and abandoned.

Once the pattern of isolation becomes the norm,

As long as there are real people doing the dirty work, it's never just about turf maintenance

repairing the rift can take far longer than most can ever imagine.

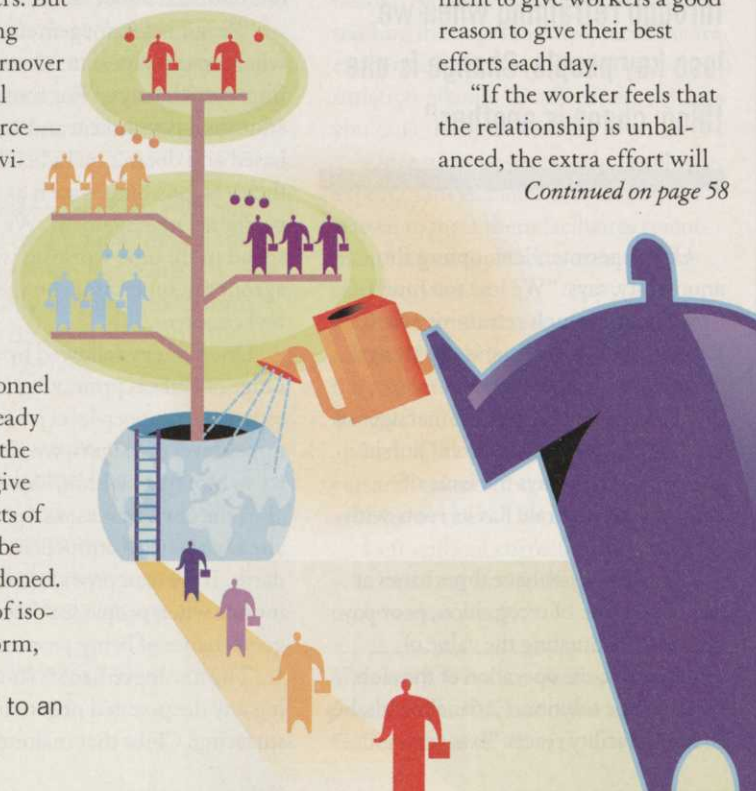
"To me, turnover is the most draining problem that can occur," says Pat Brockwell, superintendent of Black Mesa Golf Club in La Mesilla, N.M. "The time

and energy spent on hiring and training along with the low productivity that comes with the inexperience and errors of new hires keeps an operation in a crisis-management mode."

Brockwell believes it's incumbent upon management to give workers a good reason to give their best efforts each day.

"If the worker feels that the relationship is unbalanced, the extra effort will

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PERSONNEL TURNOVER will inevitably lead to an erosion of trust.

PRIORITY OF PERSONNEL

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never be given," he says. "That extra effort is always at the discretion of the worker — he chooses how much effort he will give. Management's job is to get employees to give more than the minimum."

Employee morale is affected by much more than wages, Brockwell says. A boss' flexibility and sensitivity to an employee's family or personal issues also plays a major part, he points out.

Despite the importance of two-way communication to attain positive employee morale, some bosses might opt to back off and take the denial route when things go bad. They believe it's far easier to tag people who quit as malcontents or simply unproductive. But that reaction is predictable and debilitating, and inevitably the same downward spiral of resentment and withdrawal can spread among crew members.

"We lose too much time going through retraining when we lose key people. Change is one thing; chaos is another."

One superintendent, opting for anonymity, says: "We lose too much time going through retraining when we lose key people. Change is one thing; chaos is another."

Steve Cadenelli, general manager of the Cape Cod National Golf Club in Brewster, Mass., says the issue of turnover and morale has its roots with three items.

"Generally you have three issues at work — a lack of recognition, poor pay and underestimating the value of employees to the operation of the club," he says. The solution, Cadenelli adds, lies in how a facility reacts. "It is very



IN-HOUSE PROMOTIONS encourage company-wide morale and require less training.

important to understand group dynamics and how personnel inter-relationships can make or break an operation. Slackers or negative individuals must be weeded out, or their behavior can have a very demoralizing effect on good employees."

For Jeff Spangler, the senior vice president of science and agronomy for Troon Golf, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based management company, the issue is not one of denial but of better familiarity.

"Personnel management is an area where many superintendents could improve," he says. "For most, their education is technical and agronomy-based and doesn't include other areas of their responsibilities such as financial or personnel management. We actually spend more time working with our key agronomy supervisors on these non-turf concerns."

One strategy followed by a broad range of clubs is promoting from within, especially to upper-level positions. "For upper-level managers, we almost always try to hire from within," Spangler says. "For the obvious reasons, [people] are already aware of our policies and standards. It also can provide great company morale when people see they have a good chance of being promoted."

The key ingredient is short-circuiting any deep-seated negativity from surfacing. Clubs that make assumptions

that "all is well" often miss the subtle cues present and allow them to fester and grow.

"I have found over the years, more often than not, that such problems arise from negative employees who bring down the morale and enthusiasm of others simply by their constant complaining and back biting," Cadenelli says. "Hopefully, the immediate superiors are on top of things in this regard, but if not upper management must look into such problems as a continued loss of one's better employees, which is costly in terms of re-training and productivity."

Brockwell concurs. "It's always better to talk to each other rather than about each other," he says. "Meetings can facilitate this type of exchange and promote a culture of organizational self-examination that is done in a non-threatening way."

The proper integration of all people is a daily task. They must operate with an understanding of the mission at hand and that includes how people relate with one another.

For many facilities the workforce contains a number of employees whose primary language is not English. Oscar Bucaro, superintendent of Bergen Hills Country Club in River Vale, N.J., understands that situation firsthand.

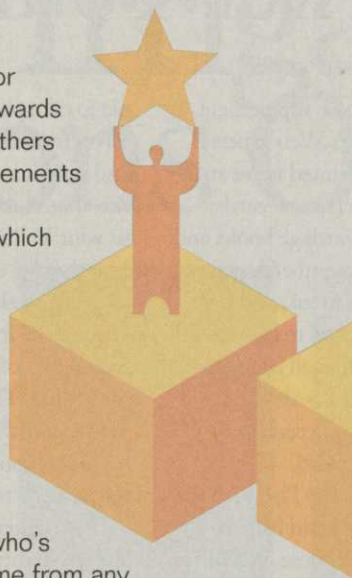
"I have an advantage because I'm

Turning off turnover. Maxing morale. What can be done?

1 SEEK EMPLOYEE SUGGESTIONS — There needs to be a mechanism for personnel to communicate their most candid comments without repercussion. Management should respond to suggestions made whether they are followed completely, partially or not at all.



2 PROVIDE MEANINGFUL RECOGNITION FOR THOSE ON STAFF — Some facilities opt for employee of the month-type awards or length-of-service awards. Others opt toward annual acknowledgements at a holiday party or the like. Appreciation bolsters loyalty, which intensifies ownership of the work ethic and its correlation to the facility. Pay is not the only consideration that workers value.



3 FOCUS ON RESULTS, NOT HIERARCHY — Too many organizations bog down because of so-called status — fixating on who's been around the longest. Solutions can come from any person at any time, and facilities need to move away from thinking of low-level personnel as drones.

4 UPDATE ALL ESSENTIAL JOB DESCRIPTIONS REFLECTING WHAT'S REALLY NEEDED NOW — Progressive facilities update job descriptions as needed. Job descriptions provide a map for employee and employer. When job descriptions become nothing more than empty words, the possibility exists that some on staff will be doing more and others less.

5 SCHEDULE INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS AS ROUTINE MATTERS — Meeting with key personnel through one-on-one meetings builds awareness before critical issues enter the scene. Don't simply meet only when there are issues. Regular one-on-one meetings alleviate anxiety and build long-term awareness between people. When critical matters do come forward, the relationship that's been built will weather whatever occurs.

6 CONSISTENCY: THE GOLDEN RULE — Want to know how to burn bridges? Be inconsistent with your staff. Consistency provides a reliable road map in terms of process, procedures and outcomes. Those venturing away from that road map are bound to get lost. The amount of time spent to get back on course will drain everyone and only add to the uncertainty that such situations will repeat again.

Editor's note: Information for this story was compiled by Matt Ward from interviews and research.

bilingual. I can speak with any member of the crew without a third party involved."

Such a direct link allows Bucaro to have daily interaction and prevent any misunderstandings. While the idea of having bilingual superintendents is not a mandatory job requirement, it pays to have someone with language command beyond English — particularly for those facilities located throughout the Sunbelt areas where there are many full-time and seasonal Hispanic workers.

No matter how well a communication program is created to deal with turnover and morale, there will be times when a definitive corrective action is needed — such as firing a disruptive employee.

"If a manager doesn't do this part of his job, why should the workers do theirs," said Brockwell. "Getting rid of bad employees also sends the message that good work is appreciated — that management knows the difference between the two."

But before such a Draconian action needs to go forward, it pays to avoid sending messages to employees that are easily misunderstood. Bucaro sees the situation plainly. "Don't promise things you can't deliver," he says.

Once promises are made, employee expectations escalate. The inability or refusal to meet them facilitates resentment that can spread to even the best staff workers.

In the final analysis, good and bad relationships between employees and their superiors may end up showing on the golf course. "I can play a golf course and tell if the management has an adversarial relationship or partnership with its workers," Brockwell says.

Left without corrective action, it won't be long before the paying customers see it too. ■

Matthew J. Ward is a freelance writer from Clifton, N.J., and editor of Jersey Golfer magazine.