

(From left) Assistant superintendents Sammy Gore and Chris Labaff confer with superintendent Paul Kaufman, author of this story.

## GOLFDOM BUDGET GUIDE

# Hire Right

**P**ersonnel issues are widely regarded as the most challenging aspect of a management-level position. To golf course superintendents, this simple truth becomes more and more apparent with each passing year. Personnel expenses make up at least half of most golf course maintenance budgets, so it is easy to see the logic of maximizing this resource.

Besides being the largest expenditure, it is also the most difficult to control. Of all the resources at your command, it is the only one that thinks on its own, has feelings and forms its own opinions. Employees also share feelings with other staff members, other managers at your facility and customers. So it makes sense to do all you can to build a strong personnel team and be particularly careful when introducing a new member to that team through the hiring process.

The logical first step in harnessing the most of your human resource is to cultivate a true team concept. In most cases, this is easier than it sounds. Your staff members are watching you as much or more as you are watching them. They are watching to see if you really care about them and if they are being treated equally compared to other members of the team. It is of the utmost importance to treat everyone consistently

and understand that rules are only rules if they are enforced. Building a team requires trust — trust that a manager cares about the members of his team, treats them fairly, empowers them to make decisions and credits them for their contribution to the overall success of the team.

No matter how strong of a team you establish, sooner or later you will lose a member and be faced with finding a replacement. The goal should be to find someone who will fit into and not disrupt the team culture you have worked so hard to establish. If the vacated position is one with more responsibility than entry level, then it is always prudent to give current team members the opportunity to apply for the position prior to going outside of your company.

First, you are dealing with a known commodity. Second, they already understand and fit into your existing team culture. Third, it demonstrates that there are opportunities for advancement within your organization. For entry-level positions, a good starting place is with recommendations from existing team members.

If you have a good team already, most teammates will be reluctant to be the one who recommended someone who does not fit in and disrupts the team. If the position

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It makes good business sense to hire people who fit into your team concept. Here's how

**BY PAUL KAUFMAN**



It is prudent to go through at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews.

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you are looking to fill is for an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager, it never hurts to contact fellow superintendents you respect who have cultivated a similar team atmosphere as you and see if they have anybody ready to fill the bill.

Also, industry professionals, such as equipment or turf product representatives, might know of good candidates they can recommend. The most common method of locating potential candidates to fill your open position, however, is by some form of advertising. No matter what vehicle you choose to advertise the position, it is of utmost importance to convey an emphasis on a strong team culture. Most job listings place too much emphasis on education and work experience. Although some degree of education and experience is important for some positions, the mention of a willingness to train the right candidate could bring out a real diamond in the rough who

might be too intimidated to apply if the listing is too heavily weighted toward education and job experience. As the years have gone by, I have learned to place more emphasis on a positive attitude, motivation and the desire to be part of a team.

### Thinning the herd

Once you start to get resumes and applications, a good course of action is to cull them down to a small pool that can be evaluated more closely. Depending on the position you are looking to fill, it never hurts to get others involved. If it is a first assistant you are going to hire, some input from the general manager or golf pro can be useful. For all other positions, I like to include my first assistant in the process because let's face it: he or she will be the one to supervise the new team member.

When evaluating resumes and applications, it's easy to make the mistake of putting less effort into the hiring process for entry-level positions compared to, say, an assistant superintendent or an equipment manager. But within the parameters of a team concept, all positions are important. There are certain red flags that show up on applications and resumes, including large gaps in employment, the frequent changing of jobs, terminations and an unwillingness to permit current or former employers to be contacted, to name a few. The depth of the pool of resumes or applications you have of which to draw should determine if any of these red flags are reason enough to prevent the applicant from being a candidate for an interview. If an applicant has one of these red flags, but still intrigues you, there is no rule that says you cannot contact him to gather more information prior to discarding him from the to-be-interviewed list. The goal of the culling process is to establish a list of three to six candidates for interviewing.

For all open positions, it is good to go through an interview process that consists of at least two separate interview sessions with as many as four interviews depending on the amount of responsibility the open position carries. Hiring someone after one interview is irresponsible and has the potential to disrupt the team culture you have

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worked so hard to achieve. Always have a prepared list of questions that you ask each candidate, and always emphasize the importance of the team atmosphere during each interview.

The initial interview should be one where you explain the parameters of the position a person is interviewing for and how the right candidate will fit into the team. The first interview is a good time to ask questions that pertain to why the person wants to work on your team, what he has to offer the team and to learn about the person's past work experience. The initial interview should be a get-to-know-each-other experience that probably won't determine who you are going to hire, but it has a good chance to determine who you will not. One thing that you want all candidates to understand after the first interview is that they are not just being evaluated for a job, but more so to become a member of a team.

### Narrowing the field

After the first interview, you will most likely be able to reduce the number you call back for a second interview. In many cases, the ones who are looking for just any position will find a job and cull themselves. The second interview is a good time to really get to know the remaining candidates. The object is to get them to talk. It is good to use tried-and-true interview techniques, such as having them list three things in their past work experience they are really proud of and three they felt they could have done better, or have them list five strengths and five weaknesses and list what attributes they possess that would make them a good addition to the team. By the end of the second interview cycle, you should have a good opinion about which candidate is the best fit. But it's still a good idea to have a third interview with the strongest candidates.

The third interview is a good time to have other key members of the team sit in, be it your first assistant, the general manager or the golf pro, and take into

account their opinions as well. By the end of the third interview, you have really made the candidates jump through some hoops, and you will leave all of them with the opinion that the position they have interviewed for is viewed as being very important to your organization.

When you have made your final decision, it is time to extend an offer of employment. Take time to clearly establish all the particulars of the position, answer any questions the successful candidate might have and determine a start date, but make it clear that the job offer is contingent on a favorable reference check.

Depending on your individual situation, it might be you conducting the reference check, or it might be a representative of your organization's human resources department. I prefer the latter, as the human resources person usually has not formed an opinion of the candidate, and that person's report will be based purely on what he or she garners from the reference check. By law, what you are able to ask former employers is usually limited to dates of employment, wage information and would they re-hire. Any disparities between the reference check and what the candidate has told you should be a big red flag, and it is prudent to err on the side of caution because it is quite frankly easy to hire someone and not so easy to fire him. If all checks out, you have done your due diligence and most likely, you have done your best to protect your team culture.

Team building is a rewarding process that does not happen overnight. But once you have successfully compiled the right blend of personalities and skill sets, it makes for a very pleasant and productive work atmosphere. You as the leader owe it to your loyal team members to be cautious when making hiring decisions of which you all must live. So take your time and hire right. ■

*Paul Kaufman is golf course superintendent of Prestwick Country Club in Conway, S.C.*



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