



Three seasoned golf course superintendents share their secrets to **inspiring employees** in a challenging economy

Motive to MOTIVATE

BY JENNIFER WEBB

The economy is improving but is still down. Golf courses — along with everyone else — are watching their budgets more closely than ever. Some are reducing staff, but almost everyone is trimming anything deemed extra. Members are deciding not to renew. Perks are being taken away.

And yet, we're all expected to work just as hard — if not harder — than before. Do more with less. Isn't that what we've been doing all along?

Because labor equates to 50 percent to 60 percent of their budgets, golf course superintendents are being forced to trim their number of employees even more and work with very lean maintenance staffs. Never has it been more important to keep employees motivated to be the best workers they can be. But how?

Let's face it, nobody ever got rich as part of a golf course maintenance crew — least of all seasonal employees, who might work six or seven months before being cut loose. And in these difficult economic

times, most clubs aren't able to reward hard work with big bonus checks or promotions.

Despite being dealt such a dismal hand, golf course superintendents are finding ways to motivate their employees to work hard, take pride in their work, arrive on time, fulfill their seasonal obligations and invest a little of themselves in the club.

Here's how:

Encourage teamwork

At Vail Golf Club in Vail, Colo., superintendent Steve Sarro made do with one less employee this season, shifting from 15 employees to 14, as part of an effort to make a 3 percent cut in his budget.

Sarro, who's in his fourth year at the resort-area club, believes strongly in the importance of building a solid team. It worked when he played sports in his younger days, and he's committed to translating that to his maintenance crew.

"I've always been in team sports, and the best teams I've been on are teams where everyone gets along and we can all go out for a beer and have fun," Sarro says. "I try to keep a light, loose atmosphere, get people excited to come in to work, and they do respond. In my 14 years in golf, people respect that and respond to it."

To encourage camaraderie, Sarro plans an occasional staff cook out or golf outing, either at his club or another nearby. The highlight is near the end of each season, when he holds an annual day trip to a nearby lake.

"We get the greens ready and take off for the day," he explains. "We rent a couple of pontoon boats, bring a few coolers and a grill, and have a fun day."

You can tell Sarro's efforts at team building have paid off by the decibel level as crew members arrive for work each day. Happy co-workers joke and laugh loudly as they congregate in the staff room.

"The thing that gets me excited the most is, in the mornings when I'm in my office, I can't even talk to my assistant because the staff room is so loud. I like that," Sarro says. "Not many staff rooms are loud and boisterous at 5:30 in the morning, but I know it's a good thing."



STEVE SARRO

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Sarro might have to talk a bit louder to communicate with his two assistants, but that's one thing he doesn't neglect to do. He believes that his underlings need to be included in conversation about his goals and reasons for doing things a certain way. He coaches them on everything from growing grass to managing people.

"We're part of that 'why' generation — where you have to explain to them what's going on and show them your goal," Sarro explains. "Painting pictures are a must-do with some of the younger employees so they can see that light at the end of the tunnel, and get what you're looking at."

Sarro encourages his assistants to attempt to understand each employee's strengths, and determine the best way to reach each one.

"For both my assistants, we stress (that) you can't manage everyone the same way. Everyone is different," Sarro says.

For example, pointing out one person's mistakes during a staff meeting might not bother some employees, but others might get angry.

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"Some people you can joke around with and almost use them as an example, and they respond to that," Sarro says. "If we're in a staff meeting and I say, 'Jim was on a machine and mowed the wrong way,' some people like Jim can take that and say, 'Ah, now I know, I'll fix it' and be OK. But Mike might be like, 'What the heck is he pointing me out for and embarrassing me in front of the whole group?' Sometimes you need to go one-on-one to train or motivate them, and (with) other people you have to do it in groups."

Carlone: Fair and square

John Carlone, certified superintendent of the Meadow Brook Club in Jericho, N.Y., emphasizes dealing with each of his 21 employees fair and square.

Each employee, seasonal or year-round, has three primary motivators — sick days, vacation days and a Christmas bonus. "Our employees get half a sick day per month. If the days aren't used (by year's end), I pay employees for them. That's incentive to be here," Carlone says.

If employees take more than four sick days a year, Carlone starts subtracting vacation days. "It motivates them to be here," he says. "It also says (someone) can get almost three weeks paid when (he or she) leaves."

The Christmas bonus is based on a formula, which includes such factors as how much they earn, how long they've been on staff, and Carlone's evaluation of their performance during the year.

For example, one year-round employee who's been on staff 15 years gets four weeks of paid vacation, he never uses any of his six sick days (earning another week of pay), and his Christmas bonus is more than \$1,000.

"He's doing quite well; he's a happy guy," Carlone says.

The techniques are designed to motivate employees to show up for work.

"Let's face it, we need the guys here. They don't do any good when they're home."

Meadow Brook Club employees also get uniforms so they don't get their own clothes dirty.

"We give them shirts, pants, gloves, sweat-shirts or a windbreaker so they look nice at

Is Money the Great Motivator?

Carlone's club has not felt a major pinch and he was happy to give his employees a 2.5 percent raise this year. He knows his is one of the few around able to give even a small increase, although he notes he has been very conservative with overtime pay this year.

"We thought that was a good motivator, when many clubs around us are not giving raises and cutting out all overtime," he says.

Steve Sarro says he's not sure money motivates his employees. "I'm against that practice because once you give out that bonus then usually that employee will expect it again," says Sarro, the golf course superintendent at Vail (Colo.) Golf Club.

And if the bonus is not given, Sarro is concerned an employee will take an I'm-not-going-to-work-as-hard-until-I-get-my-bonus attitude.

"I've never really, at any course, been

part of a financial bonus plan," Sarro says. "I would rather seek out other alternatives to get my employees excited to come to work and want to be here."

Sarro's plan must be working. One of his employees recently received an offer for more pay from a competing golf course, but she turned it down. "She had been here for a year and knew our staff, and it made her more comfortable to stick around," Sarro says.

At Oakmont Country Club in Pittsburgh, superintendent John Zimmers Jr. sees that money can be "somewhat of a motivator," but he believes even more in the power of a kind word. An employee who feels appreciated will be motivated to work to the best of his ability.

"If someone stops you and says, 'How are you, you're doing a great job, how's your family,' that goes a long way. I live by that," Zimmers says.

By Jennifer Webb

Most people in corporate America would tell you money is a motivator. People are encouraged to work hard for that big raise.

However, not only is such a raise unlikely in the world of golf course maintenance, golf course superintendents debate whether it even works to motivate their employees.

John Carlone, in his 13th season as certified superintendent of the Meadow Brook Club in Jericho, N.Y., and 24th year as a superintendent, thinks it does. "Money motivates everybody," he maintains.

Despite a challenging national economy,

work, and they appreciate not having to wear their own clothes. That motivates them, I think,” Carlone says. “They have to wash them, but they don’t have to buy them.”

Carlone runs a tight ship but believes in treating everyone equally. No one should be singled out for a bonus (such as “employee of the month”) to avoid animosity among the crew, he says.

Very rarely, but if it’s a rainy day and everyone’s been doing a good job, Carlone will let the entire crew go home a little early. However, he is careful to avoid starting a precedent.

That said, if an employee needs time off to attend a parent-teacher conference at his or her child’s school, or has a family emergency, Carlone understands and will be lenient.

“I have my rules and regulations, but I can also be casual and reward the employees too,” he says, adding he will sometimes buy pizza for the entire crew — spending from his own pocket if the budget is running too tight. “What I have to be careful of is not being taken advantage of.”

Zimmers leads by example

A place like Pittsburgh’s Oakmont Country Club, which has held more major championships than any other club in the United States, has a reputation to uphold — and it relies on its employees to make sure that reputation doesn’t get tarnished. Everything must be perfect, from the condition of the fairways to the cleanliness of the clubhouse — and a motivated employee makes all the difference.

Superintendent John Zimmers Jr. understands this and takes his job as crew chief seriously. He leads a team of 35 or 40 people in season.

“I take great pride in leading by example,” he says. “I’m the first one here and probably the last one to leave (each day). In order to achieve what we ask them to achieve, I think you have to be there and participate.”

Zimmers believes in getting to know his employees by diving in to work with them.

“I’m pretty hands-on and spend a lot of time with the staff, and that’s pretty important. I think that goes a long way,” he says.



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JOHN CARLONE

“I don’t do it as much as I’d like, but I will grab a mower and mow with them sometimes. I really enjoy that, and I think they understand the importance of it when I’m involved with it.”

Zimmers also thinks it’s important to understand your employees. Know what’s going on in their lives. Who has children? Who’s getting married?

“Most important, if you create an atmosphere where it’s just a job, I don’t think that’s conducive to what we do. We work long hours, we work weekends, we work holidays,” he says.

A feeling of partnership will lead people to take pride in their work, which is its own motivation.

“You can motivate people only so much, then they have to have their own interest and their own pride,” Zimmers says. “You can stand in front of everyone all you want . . . (but eventually they need to realize) we’re doing it together to achieve the same ultimate goal.”

Zimmers says he tries to reward employees in random, small ways. If someone needs time off, he will schedule accordingly. If Zimmers gets tickets to a local sporting event, he offers them to the staff.

Whenever possible, Zimmers likes to acknowledge his staff in club newsletters or on PowerPoint presentations to the club. He

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JOHN ZIMMERS

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points out their hard work, backgrounds and accomplishments, noting the staff is the club's No. 1 asset.

"Without the staff we can't bring this golf course to life the way it should be," he says. "We want to do the right things and we want to be in

a position where, any opportunity we have, we want to take care of you. When you are up front about that, (employees) appreciate that and realize that."

During the fall and winter, Zimmers motivates his 15-member off-season crew by allowing his staff to select an employee of the week.

"We're huge football fans here, so in the fall we start giving out game balls," he explains. In September, he buys 20 or 30 footballs from a sporting goods store, then awards one, or sometimes two, each week until the Super Bowl. Staff members submit their nominations throughout the week, and balls are delivered with great fanfare each Friday.

"It's been a pretty big hit; they have a lot of fun with that," Zimmers says.

The Oakmont grounds department offers a separate award for the Employee of the Month. The employee receives a mention in the club's newsletter, as well as money, a dinner gift certificate or a shirt from the clubhouse. Zimmers calls that "a really big hit."

Zimmers starts each day's work with a staff meeting in which he discusses good — and bad — things that happened the previous day.

"I'm usually pretty proud of them," he says. "They step up and take a lot of pride in what they're doing."

The bottom line

Sarro, Carlone and Zimmers say younger workers have a different attitude about work, and tapping into what motivates them often comes down to understanding what makes them tick. Since most teenage and college-age workers have grown up with a variety of technology to make their lives easier, they sometimes have a hard time adjusting to working with their hands "the old-fashioned way." Someone who grew up in the era of technology doesn't necessarily want to push mowers around bunkers all day, Zimmers says.

"They say, 'There has to be an easier way to do this,'" he says. "I think it's been a little more of a challenge for me to help them understand that some jobs are just hard and there's not equipment that will do it. I find myself generally explaining to people what we're doing and why we're doing it this way to achieve it. I think it helps a lot (to motivate them) if you lay out why and what we're trying to achieve."

In the end, though, if you treat your employees well — with fairness, kindness and respect — they will respond with their best efforts.

"I always feel like they make me look good," Carlone says. "If I'm keeping them happy, they're going to keep me happy. That's the bottom line." ■

Webb, a contributing writer for Golfdom, is based in Medina, Ohio.