

Signs dot the walls of the maintenance facility at Valhalla GC like hulking billboards on a busy freeway. The signs were hung by Valhalla certified superintendent Mark Wilson, who didn't post them to pretty up the place. Wilson firmly believes the signs perform a fundamental and critical function.

The signs use different themes in their approach, but their collective message is the same—to motivate golf course maintenance employees to be better workers.

For Wilson, motivating employees is as important as maintaining consistent green speeds. And just as there's a science to tending turf, Wilson believes there's a knowledge to tending employees that turns them into better workers. "Our background is in turfgrass management, but we deal with people everyday," Wilson says. "Not only do we have to grow turfgrass, we have to grow people."

Other superintendents share Wilson's philosophy. They place employee motivation high on their lists of management goals. Of course, they want employees to be better motivated so they're better workers. But they also want their employees to be better motivated so they enjoy coming to work.

But motivating employees is not easy. It's not simply about providing someone a pay raise, and it entails more than giving a worker a slap on the back for a job well done. The superintendents who are known for their successful motivational methods didn't retrieve the ideas from the bottom of cereal boxes. They thought long and hard about what it takes to motivate employees. They also relied on their years of experience of what motivational strategies worked and didn't work.



Signs and teamwork

One of the biggest signs in the Valhalla maintenance facility's locker room reads, "No problems. Only solutions."

"A problem is a negative and a solution is a positive," Wilson says. "We have to realize a problem, but the turning point is doing something about it."

There are introspective signs, such as, "Dare to soar — your attitude almost always determines your altitude." There are no-nonsense signs, such as, "Focus — Obstacles are frightful things you see when you fail to focus on your goals." There are signs displaying humor and prayer. There's even a sign sporting the hackneyed phrase, "Don't worry, be happy."

Two years ago, Louis Wilkins, a member of the Valhalla golf maintenance staff, died from cancer. A sign serves in his honor. A poster with a teamwork theme hangs in the maintenance facility with Wilkins' name under it.

"He was the ultimate teamwork guy," Wilson says. "He was our symbol for teamwork."

Wilson believes the signs are subtle but successful motivators and help employees keep positive attitudes and maintain discipline.

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Mark Wilson is surrounded by signs in his office at Valhalla. Here Wilson holds a framed message from the late Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi, famous for his motivational prowess.

JOHN NATION

“We have to realize a problem, but the turning point is doing something about it.”

MARK WILSON
VALHALLA GC

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None of the signs at Valhalla display messages about turf. That's because Wilson believes a good turf maintenance program starts with people.

“Sixty-five percent of our budget is people,” says Wilson, who has about 25 full-time employees in the summer and 15 in the winter. “It's where we spend the most amount of money. It's where we need to get the most productivity and value.”

Despite the signs' dominant presence throughout Valhalla's maintenance facility, don't think for a minute that Wilson relies solely on them to motivate his employees. He knows it takes it more than that — and it starts with him leading by example.

One of Wilson's favorite sayings is, “Your actions speak so loud that I can't hear what you're saying.”

Managers who lead by example motivate employees to work harder for them, experts say. When they lead by example, they show that they want to be in touch.

Wilson will throw “parties” to get his crew fired up to do a project, such as laying sod.

“Not too long ago, I said to them, ‘Let's go have a scum party,’ Wilson says. “We went out to the pond near the 18th green to clean the scum out of it. It was a team effort, me included.”

Yes, Wilson got some scum on his clothes. And, yes, it's important for him to show his

employees that he's willing to get down and dirty with them.

“It's not important that I do it every time,” Wilson says. “But it's important that they know I'm not above it.”

Tom Alex, director of golf course maintenance at Grand Cypress GC in Orlando, says leading by example is integral to motivating employees.

Alex says the two superintendents at the 45-hole Grand Cypress, Jim Sullivan and Pat Gibaratz, are hands-on supervisors who aren't afraid to get muddy with their crews.

“They work side by side with their crews,” says Alex, noting that he's also not above grabbing a shovel and jumping in a ditch. “That motivates the [crews] quite a bit.”

Setting goals — together

Alex says the 50 members of Grand Cypress' maintenance crew are more motivated to work if they're given specific daily goals. “We tell them what we expect of them, and what we're going to get done.”

For the detail crew, the daily goal could be to edge all the cart paths and bunkers on holes one through six, in addition to hover mowing all ledges and lake banks on the holes.

“If you put them out there and they're just doing their own things and going at their own paces, they're just going to get done whatever they get done,” Alex says.

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Sorting Out the Self-Starters From the Rest

You've heard athletes talk about coaches who were so inspiring that the athletes were willing to run through walls for them. But then there's the other end of the spectrum. Some people just don't get motivated, even if the motivator is Vince Lombardi.

“Don't be fooled,” says Tom Alex, director of golf course maintenance at Grand Cypress GC in Orlando. “There are certain people, that no matter how much you pay them and how much you thank them, they're not going to be motivated.”

Which brings Alex to an important point: the hiring process.

The onus of motivating should not be placed entirely on any manager, whether that manager is a superintendent or the head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. People have to be self-motivated, and that's what Alex looks for when he's interviewing potential candidates to join his crew. “You have to hire someone who's a self starter,” he says.

But Alex is realistic. He knows some workers mow grass and rake bunkers on golf courses because they don't have lofty career ambitions. “It's just one of the things we have to deal with in this industry.”

Alex says he tries to discover if a po-

tential employee is self-motivated by asking pertinent questions during the job interview. He might offer this question: A group of three people are edging bunkers. You and another person are working hard but the third person is not doing anything. How do you handle that situation?”

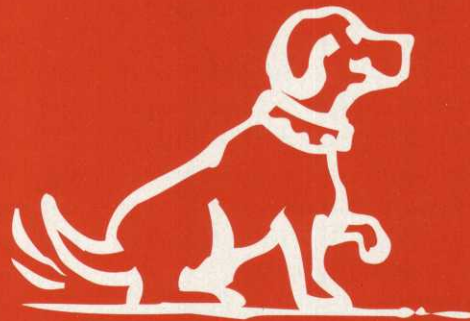
“I want the [interviewee] to tell [the person who's not working], ‘We're all making the same money, and you need to pick up the slack,’” Alex says.

The wrong answer, Alex adds, would be the interviewee saying that he would mind his own business and not say a word to the lazy person.

— Larry Aylward, Editor

Sure Thing #1:

**A HAPPY
DOG WAGS
ITS TAIL.**





Tom Alex, superintendent of Grand Cypress GC (left), says workers like Chad Tordsen are more motivated to work if they're given daily goals.

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Wilson says it's motivating for most everyone who works at the course, including the superintendent, his crew, the pro and the general manager, to have a common goal, even if it's as general as making the course a better-looking place and better-run operation.

"It's a goal everybody can understand," Wilson says. "And it shows that we're not here just for Mark Wilson to win or the general manager or the pro to win. Everybody is going to win."

Pat Finlen, certified superintendent of The Olympic Club in San Francisco, also gives his crew a daily goal, albeit a simple one.

"Rather than set these lofty goals of where we want to be in a year or two and articulate them to the staff, I just ask them to make the course a little bit better today than it was yesterday," Finlen says. "Sure enough, as things get better every week, you look back and see that things have changed dramatically."

It's an effective message that's motivating, Finlen says. Telling employees what you expect also entails showing them how you want a job done, Finlen points out. It might be as simple as showing them the best way to rake a bunker.

"A lot of times we think our employees have the same vision as we do," Finlen says. "Some do and some don't."

Employees are also more motivated if they're not doing the same tasks daily, Alex says. To keep them fresh, Alex employs workers on a job

rotation program where they perform different tasks each day.

"Once a person has been with us long enough, we train him on everything we possibly can," Alex says. "It helps keep him motivated simply because he doesn't get so bored with his job. He might be mowing fairways on Monday, raking bunkers on Tuesday and edging with the detail crew on Wednesday."

Keeping newer employees motivated by their work is more difficult. They are the people who operate hover mowers and edgers day in and out. They get paid the least and work the hardest. "Our biggest turnover is right at the bottom," says Alex, whose starting employees make about \$8.50 an hour.

Motivation goes hand in hand with learning, Finlen says. Workers like to learn new things, but sometimes they must take chances to do so. "I encourage employees to make calculated mistakes," Finlen says. "People learn from their mistakes, and they learn by taking calculated risks."

The right environment

When he came to the 45-hole Olympic Club in February 2002, Finlen faced challenges that had to do with motivating employees. It was an especially difficult challenge for Finlen because he was managing a 50-person union staff.

Finlen was also replacing a superintendent

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Sure Thing #2:

CHILDREN WALK THROUGH PUDDLES.





Pat Finlen, superintendent of the Olympic Club (left), believes that motivating employees doesn't mean changing their behavior. It means changing the environment they work in.

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who had been at the Olympic Club for 30 years. He knew that the veteran employees weren't going to change their work habits to his style overnight. And Finlen knew that if he forced his ways on the employees, they would resist and even possibly file grievances against him with the union.

But Finlen realized that motivating

employees doesn't mean changing workers' behavior. It does mean changing the environment they work in, however.

"Changing the environment means changing workers' perceptions and attitudes before changing their behavior," Finlen says. "Once the environment has changed, the behavior will follow."

Finlen cites an example. "Shortly after I arrived here, I made the decision to change to hand-raking bunkers daily rather than a combination of hand-raking and using a machine," he says. "[The new system] included a raking method that was continuous in the bunker so there were no rake marks left in the bunker. This was for playability as well as aesthetics."

Finlen says he could have instructed his staff to maintain the bunkers that way without an explanation, but he took a different approach.

"The approach was to show staff members what happens to a golfer's ball when it lands in the bunker in marks left by the machine or their rakes," Finlen says. "Rather than change their behavior by just telling them to do a job differently, we changed their behavior by changing the environment — their perception of what the bunker should look like and who is affected by that change — from what it used to be."

Because Finlen made the effort to show them this, they were motivated to maintain the bunkers his way.

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Hydration and Motivation

Love your mind, and mind your brain," Doug Bench told attendees of the Golf Course Builders Association of America's Summer Meeting during his keynote address. Bench, a former educator, trial attorney and judge, is now a motivational speaker. His talk at the August conference was entitled, "The Science of Permanent Self-Motivation." Bench spoke about how the brain is directly connected to self-motivation, awareness and performance.

For people who work on golf courses — whether builders, architects, superintendents or their crews — Bench stressed how vital it is for them to stay hydrated while working. If they don't stay hydrated on the job, Bench said, they might not stay motivated on the job.

Bench said the brain uses more than 30 percent of the water the body takes in. He also pointed out that the brain can't store energy or water.

"[The brain] must have a constantly replenished supply of water in order for the neurons to function properly," Bench said. [People working on golf courses should] stay totally hydrated at all times."

Bench claimed that research shows that if the brain is dehydrated less than 5 percent, its functioning power is reduced by more than 50 percent.

"Therefore, please make sure plenty of water is available to your employees at all times," he stressed.

— Larry Aylward, Editor

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“When you praise an employee, you need to do it with specifics.”

PAT FINLEN
THE OLYMPIC CLUB

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“It goes back to telling the staff members what is expected of them, letting them know by example what good performance is and giving them the tools to do the job correctly,” Finlen says.

Paying compliments

It’s important to thank your workers for a job well done — just not every hour. Giving a worker too much credit for doing a good job can lose its luster. “It can become rhetoric,” Alex says.

Finlen points out that it’s important to compliment specifics and not just say continually, “You’re doing a great job.”

“A worker who hears that over and over will

get tired of hearing it,” Finlen says. “When you praise an employee, you need to do it with specifics. For instance, you could say, ‘Joe, you did a great job on the weed eater today, especially around the trees on holes six, seven and eight.’”

Alex strives to thank his crew members daily for their efforts, providing they did a good job. “I tell them I appreciate it,” he says. “The message is simple and sincere.”

Alex says his staff has three barbecues every year. At that time, he makes it a point to let workers know how much he appreciates their efforts.

Finlen will tell his workers when they’re doing a good job. He’ll also share positive

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Former Course Worker Reveals What Motivated Him on the Job

By Luke Wagner

During my six seasons working as a golf course maintenance employee for a country club in Evansville, Ind., the motivation to do my most efficient work came relatively easy. While I consider myself a self-motivator, those more than 90 degree F Midwest summer days tested my skills periodically. At times, motivating thoughts were pushed to the side by that eighth hour of having an industrial-sized weed eater in my grasp. But on those days, I developed an appreciation for the motivational actions I took and the occasional motivation from the multitude of superintendents I worked for to get over my fatigue.

I remember my first day on the job, more than seven years ago. I was nervous, like any job taken while in high school, but eager to learn how to help transform a wild landscape into a beautiful golf course. Unfortunately, the only part I had in that transformation that day involved the weeds around about 300 trees between holes No. 6 and No. 7. Two experienced employees dropped me off at the crest of a hill adjacent to the No. 7 tee with a gas can and a weed eater that morning. “Just work your way back towards the shop,” one of them said as he drove the utility vehicle into the distance.

About 100 trees and four hours into my day, the superintendent appeared with a cup of water. As I pulled my safety glasses away from my face and consumed



the cold, crystal liquid, I asked him: “How does it look? Am I doing OK?”

He smiled and said: “Looks great. I’ll tell you if you’re doing it wrong.”

While it may sound trivial now, his comment helped me get through the remainder of the day with a better attitude than I had in those first four hours. And it illustrates two points that are important for any superintendent to think about when motivating members of a crew:

- let them know you care; and
- let them know you notice.

All superintendents must have a basic human interest in their employees to get the maximum performance out of them. The cup of water and the smile were small gestures from the superintendent, but they did the trick.

In addition, an employee must feel what he or she is doing contributes to the overall objective. This is achieved with feedback.

Sure, weed eating isn’t the most complicated of tasks, but it can be performed wrong. The fact the superintendent showed up to check on me and assure me that he would provide future feedback (good or bad) were also motivating factors.

From my personal experience and observations of some co-workers, I found friendly competition along with a non-monetary reward system to be the most effective motivating factors among experienced employees. That friendly competition can include anything from who can burn the straightest stripes in the fairways to which group can edge the most bunkers in a day.

My final favorite motivating method is leading by example. Only a select few diehard golf course employees perform to their maximum ability for an office manager. The point is that all superintendents need to get out on occasion and be a working member of the team. While pointing a finger can be motivating, picking up a shovel for an hour or walk-mowing a set of greens when personnel gets tight reminds everyone of the team effort and objective.

The bottom line: Any leader who shows a genuine human interest in the people working for him will maximize human performance. And isn’t that an often forgotten objective of management?

Wagner worked at Oak Meadow GC in Evansville, Ind., for six seasons.



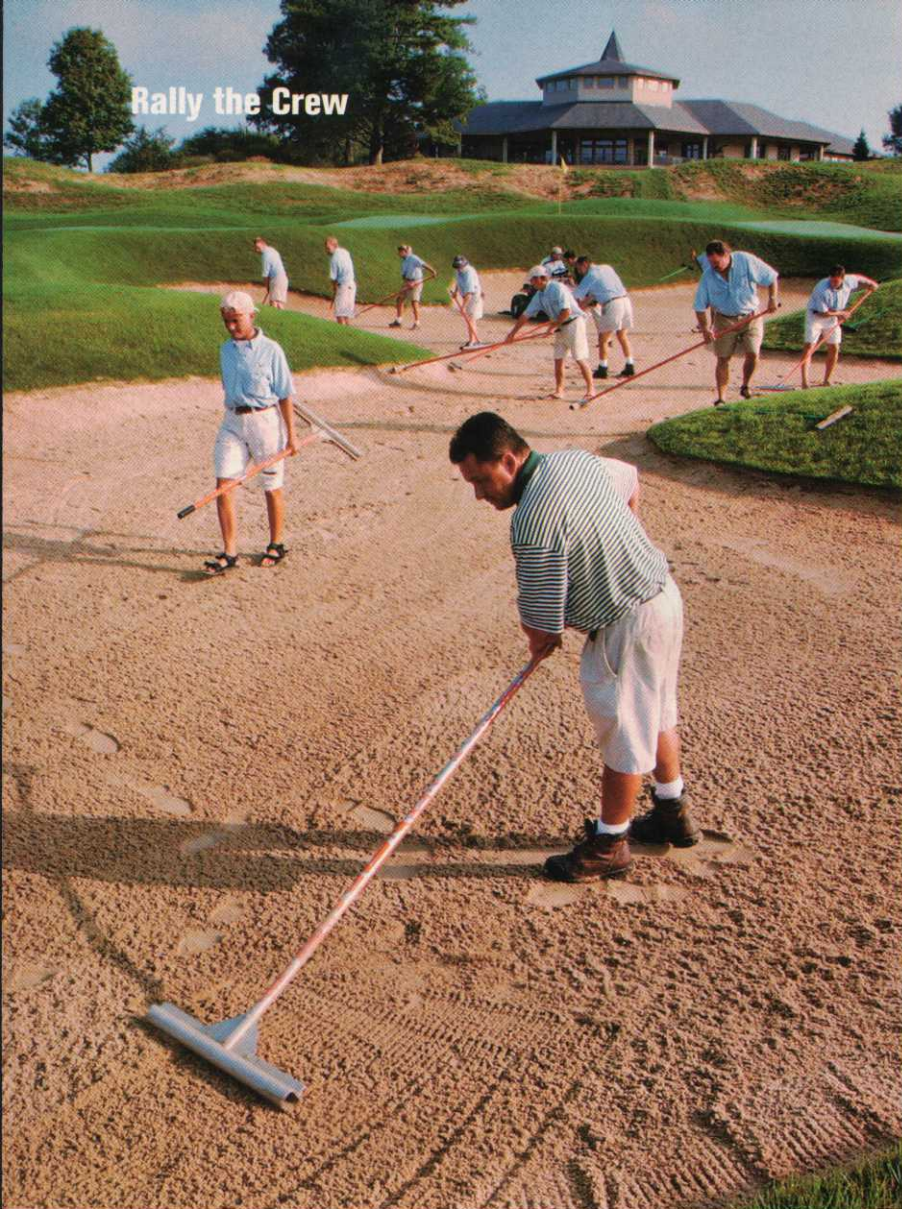
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JOHN NATION

At Valhalla, superintendent Mark Wilson doesn't hesitate to get down and dirty with his crew members. "I think it's important that they know I'm not above it," he says.

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comments from the members with them about the course's appearance.

He strives to make sure they receive recognition, whether it's posting a photo of them on the bulletin board for doing a task well or mentioning their names in a meeting for a job well done. "It means a lot to them," Finlen says.

The firm approach

Sometimes, a manager has to be firm to motivate employees. Firm might mean simply telling employees that they're not doing a good job.

"If we normally get our fairways mowed in five hours on nine holes and all of the sudden it takes seven hours, I have to question that at the end of the day," Alex says. "If I don't question when it happens, then I've got a problem because that five-hour job just turned into a seven-hour job, and that seven-hour job could turn into a 10-hour job."

Firm also might mean getting in a worker's

face to motivate him. When he was younger, the 43-year-old Alex says he lit up workers more frequently for making mental on-the-job errors and offering weak excuses for poorly performed work.

"Certain individuals respond to that," he says. "But a lot of people today, especially younger individuals, don't respond to it."

But if you dress down a worker like Sgt. Carter bawling out Gomer Pyle, do it in private, Alex states. "You can praise people in public, but don't scorn them in public."

Alex says managers also shouldn't make ranting and raving a part of their daily management styles.

"You have to pick those battles," he adds. "Because if you rant and rave all the time, it's just a rant and a rave."

Finlen has a different view. He says the drill sergeant approach will only work if it's consistent. "If you have the drill sergeant-type environment, the only way that's going to work is if you're continually the drill sergeant."

Finlen says he doesn't like the in-your-face approach. "I don't like to think I have to go into that role to get employees motivated," he adds.

Finlen stresses that it's important to play the part of an understanding boss. For instance, if one of his employees is consistently late to work, Finlen will talk to the employee about his tardiness, not threaten him with losing his job.

"That's not to say I condone being late, but people are late for a reason," Finlen says, noting that it's his job to find out why.

Finlen's point is that employee communication breeds motivation. Wilson agrees, saying that employees are motivated to work harder when they respect their bosses.

Wilson says he wants his employees to like him — not because he's nice but because they know they can count on him to be a team player.

"Even in a work environment, love is very powerful," says Wilson, who has read books and attended seminars on how to become a better motivator. "You have to like the guy next to you to be successful."

Respect is a two-way street, Finlen points out. To gain employees' respect, superintendents must treat them honestly and fairly.

"I have an open-door policy," Finlen says. "If anybody has a complaint or problem, I try to work with him." ■