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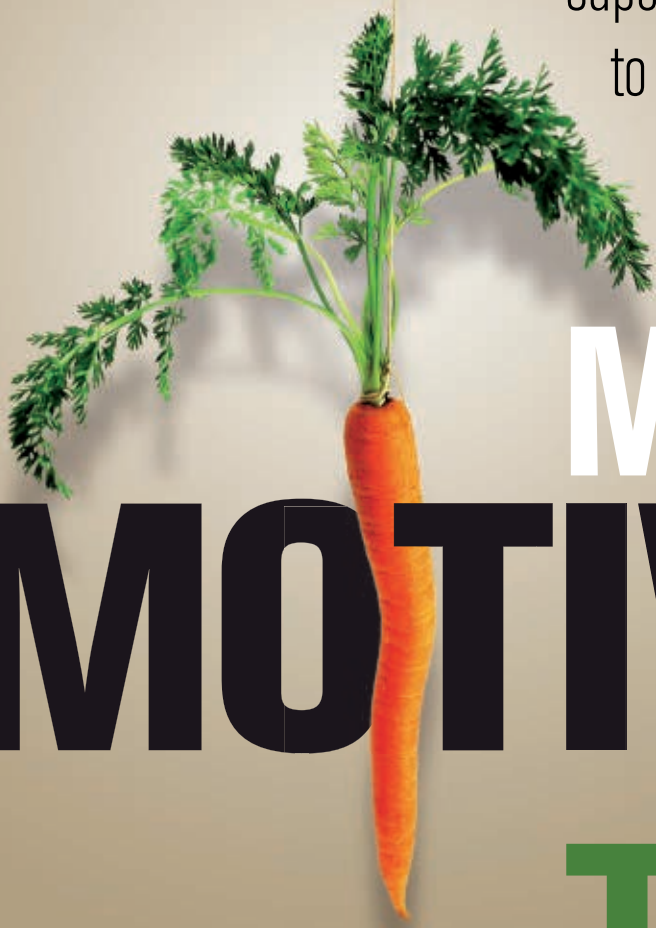
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Three seasoned golf course superintendents share their secrets to **inspiring employees** in a challenging economy

# Motive to MOTIVATE

BY JENNIFER WEBB

**T**he 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

**"Not many staff rooms are loud and boisterous at 5:30 in the morning, but I know it's a good thing."**

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

**M**ost 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 13<sup>th</sup> season as certified superintendent of the Meadow Brook Club in Jericho, N.Y., and 24<sup>th</sup> 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.



**"I have my rules and regulations, but I can also be casual and reward the employees too."**

**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

**“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.”**

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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.*



# Fertility & Functionality

Superintendents constantly seek the right fertilization programs to keep on the cutting edge

**ALSO:**

Understanding the Many Forms of Nitrogen, page 48

One Size Does Not Fit All, page 49

Philosophy and Fertilization, page 50

The Combo-Meal Approach, page 54

**ABOUT THIS SERIES**

Ask any golf course superintendent, and he'll tell you feeding the turfgrass is an art. It's not like simply placing a bowl of Lucky Charms in front of a cereal-loving, 7-year-old kid.

That's why *Golfdom*, in unison with AGROTAIN International and LebanonTurf, has embarked on this three-part report. We want to educate superintendents on the art of feeding turfgrass, among other fertilization issues.

**Part one**, titled "Fertility and Functionality," examines modern-day fertility management. Superintendents throughout the country discuss their fertility philosophies. In **part two**, "The Right Stuff," university researchers discuss the reasons why fertilization does more to improve poor quality turfgrass or maintain good quality turfgrass than any other management practice. In **part three**, "The Future of Fertility," we'll peek into the not-too-distant future – 2025 – to see what golf course superintendents will use as fertilizer and how they'll be using it. We'll also discuss the impact environmental restrictions will have on future fertilizer technology.

PHOTO BY: LARRY AYLWARD

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# Understanding the Many Forms of Nitrogen

It was just nine years ago that the Lange-Stegmann Co., a family-owned business since 1926, had the opportunity to purchase a technology that improves nitrogen efficiency. This would ultimately be the birth of AGROTAIN International, as well as the start of UMAXX, UFLEXX and HYDREXX Stabilized Nitrogen products.

Over the years, it's not a coincidence that AGROTAIN has come to be known as the nitrogen management experts. Stabilized nitrogen products provide superintendents with maximum nitrogen control, and our people strive to educate superintendents on the benefits of our technology and its ability to improve nitrogen efficiency.



By Mike Stegmann

Every turf professional understands the importance of nitrogen. It influences turf health and quality more than any other nutrient and, for this reason, nitrogen efficiency is a key component of every turf management program and a top concern among turf professionals. But to get at the root of nitrogen efficiency, it's important to understand the many forms of nitrogen used in today's fertilizers.

Water-soluble nitrogen fertilizers, such as ammonium nitrate, ammonium sulfate and urea, supply a form of nitrogen that's immediately available for the plant to use. Although these options provide a quick-greening, quick-release nitrogen has many drawbacks. It readily leaches, can cause lush growth and has a limited response time. It also has a high potential to burn if applied in hot or dry conditions. For all these reasons, quick release is best for small areas where frequent applications are possible or even desirable, and when used in combination with control products or growth regulators.

The consequences of quick-release nitrogen can be avoided and the benefits of nitrogen prolonged with an enhanced-efficiency fertilizer. While most turf professionals are familiar with fertilizer products commonly referred to as "slow" or "controlled" release, it's important to recognize another category of enhanced-efficiency fertilizer.

In 1994, the Association of American Plant Food Control

Officials (AAPFCO) and The Fertilizer Institute established the Slow Release Fertilizer Task Force. In addition to clarifying the slow-release category, the task force acknowledged a similar but separate category of enhanced-efficiency nitrogen: stabilized nitrogen.

Stabilized nitrogen is a urea product that provides results much like comparable slow-release nitrogen sources. The fertilizer products called slow release are those that release, or convert to a plant-available form at a slower rate than quick-release nitrogen. Stabilized nitrogen is plant available as soon as it's watered in. What the plant can't use is held. In this plant-available form, the potential loss from volatility, denitrification and leaching is minimized.

In essence, stabilized nitrogen products deliver a long-lasting, consistent source of nitrogen to plants regardless of soil temperature or moisture with minimal escape into the air or groundwater. These traits make stabilized nitrogen products the ideal all-weather choice for turf professionals.

Regardless the season, stabilized nitrogen products make predicting the weather — especially cold weather or major swings in rainfall — a thing of the past for turf professionals. Because stabilized nitrogen doesn't rely on microbial activity for nitrogen availability, cold soil temperatures have little effect on its efficiency. The stabilized nitrogen that's applied is available to the plant as soon as watering — either through rainfall or irrigation — takes place. What the plant doesn't immediately use will be held onto the soil colloid as a reserve for future use, ensuring a consistent even feed.

Perhaps, most importantly, given constant budget constraints, the switch to stabilized nitrogen products can also provide superintendents with time, labor and cost savings. ■

*Stegmann is president of Lange-Stegmann Company and AGROTAIN International.*





# One Size Does Not Fit All In the Plant Nutrition Field

**F**ertilization practices and technologies have come a long way since the seeds for what would become LebanonTurf were first sown in Lebanon, Pa., more than 60 years ago. In those early days, research into the chemical elements that promoted healthy turf was not nearly the science that it has become. Nor were golf course superintendents and landscape managers the turfgrass geniuses that many are today.

Modern fertilization still incorporates the basic chemical elements — plus the help of Mother Nature — as essential ingredients for plant growth and vitality. But how those elements are combined and delivered to the plant is now based on advanced technologies never imagined 60 years ago.

Today, there's a growing understanding of the need for a comprehensive approach to plant physiological fitness. Our company is committed to bringing a complete line of products and the expertise required to help superintendents and turf managers find the solutions that meet their needs.

We understand that today's turf questions are far more complex than whether a foliar or granular approach is the best solution. At times a straightforward combination of basic ingredients is what's needed. At other times, the solution requires in-depth understanding of turf's metabolic function, photosynthetic rates and capacities, which has spawned the emerging field of biological plant nutrition.

This belief that one size does not fit all is the underlying motivation that has reshaped our company in the past several years.

In 2002, LebanonTurf introduced its patented Composite Technology to the fertilizer manufacturing process. Starting with premium forms of nitrogen sources and fusing them with phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients to create a homogeneous granule proved to be the breakthrough that produced improved particle dispersion, granule integrity and nitrogen activity.

In late 2008, parent company Lebanon Seaboard announced the acquisition of the Emerald Isle line of premium foliar fertilizer products. Emerald Isle True Foliar products produce excellent turfgrass playing conditions — consistent surfaces, ideal color and outstanding turf density — while providing seaplant extract and other beneficial supplements for root

growth, stress tolerance and disease resistance.

Complementing the Emerald Isle acquisition, Lebanon added Novozymes' turf and landscape business, including the Roots products and technologies, last July. In combination, the acquisitions reinforced LebanonTurf's commitment to the emerging field of biological plant nutrition, says Kathy Bishop, CEO and president of LebanonTurf. "Biology and microbes are fundamentally changing agronomic science and how nutrition is viewed and applied. This acquisition puts us on the front edge of that change," she adds.

"We now can offer customers access to the broadest and most complete offering of nutrition and physiological fitness products today — from fundamental N-P-K offerings to highly advanced biotechnology-based products," adds Dave Heegard, vice president and general manager of LebanonTurf.

The always-changing landscape of modern fertilization provides a rich subject for *Golfdom's* Fertility Report. Our company is pleased to help bring readers the insights of successful superintendents and landscape managers in the ongoing effort to answer not only the question of "What's working?" but also the logical follow-up query, "Why?" ■



**By Mike  
Sisti**

*Mike Sisti is marketing manager for LebanonTurf, a division of privately held Lebanon Seaboard Corp.*



# Philosophy *and* Fertilization

**Superintendents put  
a lot of thinking into  
their fertility programs**

**BY ANTHONY PIOPPI,  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

**T**HERE ARE MANY VARIABLES that determine the fertilization methods of a golf course superintendent — from soil type, to the demands of members and owners, to water quality.

Knowing the particular situation is key to feeding turf in a way that keeps the plants and players happy. To ensure their fertilizers are being utilized as best as they can, many superintendents are taking care to take care of their soil, as well.

Like Kevin Smith, for instance, whose task at Bryan Park Golf & Conference Center in Greensboro, N.C., is not easy. The certified superintendent oversees two 18-hole courses at the municipally owned facility and is also the head agronomist for the management company, Pinnacle Golf Properties,

PHOTO BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.; PHOTO COURTESY: PETE SERMINI (OPPOSITE)