



Ethics and the Modern Superintendent

By Mark Keinert



I've always known that ethics or a discussion of the code of ethics would be my president's message one day to this organization. It is a topic that always seems to lurk in the background, popping up from time to time through the course of a year. I remember one of the earliest dilemmas I faced as a young superintendent was when I learned of a rumor that had spread through the country club. The rumor implied that the only reason I purchased fertilizer XYZ was because I received a free television. A kickback or a bribe.

Well, I'm here to tell you that the reception on that television is about as clear as the day I received it. For me it is the best Sergeant Schultz television ever made, because I still "see nothing and hear nothing." Call me a chump, but I have a hard time accepting a free hat from a sales rep, unless the entire crew gets one too. I think this may have come from a conservative background of not wanting to owe anyone anything for anytime for the fear of the obligation of future paybacks that I might not be in a position to deliver on.

In my mind, ethics are a cornerstone of the basic building blocks of professional image. The GCSAA has invested much time and human resources in building the recognition that we demand. There has been constructive talk about ethics. At the recently completed chapter representative meeting, ethical behavior was discussed. I'm sure that it will be an agenda item at one of our future chapter relation meetings. I know first hand that GCSAA is planning on putting together a program just for students. Here in our state association, educational chairman David Smith is considering the viability of putting together a forum on ethics for discussion at our Spring Business meeting. In our membership directory, our code of ethics is spelled out

clearly. There are ten "golden rules" to live by. I will state the code and ask you questions of situations that come to mind based one of the commandments in our own code of ethics.

1. "Recognize and discharge all my responsibilities to my employers at all times." Where does consulting fit into this category, especially when you have been asked to consult at another man's golf course? Do you do so by contacting him first? Is he a part of the consultation team?

2. "Practice and insist on sound business principles in exercising the responsibilities of my position." Does that make purchasing the cheapest item the right choice over buying the best one for the job, ethically?

3. "Utilize every opportunity to extend my professional knowledge as a means to increase my value to

my employers, my industry and my profession." How many of you volunteer your time to serve your chapter as leaders? Or go into schools to teach the benefits of the golf course and the environment. Or serve your local communities, churches and schools.

4. "Truly assume the responsibility for the physical well-being of your golf course by insisting in and exercising the prerogative necessary for sound professional judgment in declaring the golf course playable or unplayable, according to prevailing conditions." I think that the majority of golf course superintendents do an excellent job in determining the status of his or her golf course. Yet how many of us look bad when we find golf courses still open for play when the greens are frozen or a wet, soggy mess?

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5. "Maintain the highest standards of personal conduct to reflect credit and add to the stature of the profession of golf course superintendents." Does that mean dressing down to the dinner table by wearing ball caps? Hollering loudly to the next table, when a speaker is addressing one of our meetings?

6. "Neither engages in nor supports any exploitation of my association, industry and profession." Years ago, it was my interpretation that this prevented golf course superintendents from appearing in newsprint or magazine ads for profit or from using the GCSAA or CGCS logo to sell a product for personal gain. Today, we are asked to base our endorsements strictly upon satisfactory personal experiences with the product that we are promoting. Is it right to give our membership directory to a non-member sales representative so that he can use it to build a sales list? How about giving out the prices of one chemical salesman to another? Is that exploitation or good business in bargaining for the best price?

7. "Avoid dissemination of any malicious information concerning other golf courses and or other golf course superintendents." This is probably one of the hardest ones to live up to. It is basic human nature to compare, reject, love or hate your fellow man, but does it make it right to backstab? To spread rumors and half-truths? There are a number of salesmen that should pay attention to number seven.

8. "Lend my support to and actively participate in the efforts of my local chapter and the national association to improve public understanding and recognition of the profession of golf course superintendents." It is here that I feel that GCSAA has made the greatest stride of the century by creating and airing "Par for the Course." This television news-magazine is seen in over 300,000 homes on Sundays. When you think of the exposure we receive by this program just on the East coast where the majority of golf courses in the country are found, it is dramatic. The "PR" value of this program is just now being realized and its potential understood.

9. "Extend technical help to any golf course when called upon by the superintendent." The key here is

when called upon by the superintendent. "I'm forever in the debt to those unselfish superintendents who came to the aid of our distressed golf course during the severe drought of 1988."

10. "Recognize, observe, and expect in return the highest standards of integrity in my relationship with other golf course superintendents." Read this one as it has subsections on seeking employment and visiting other golf courses. Wouldn't it be great if everyone who applied for an employment vacancy ascertained and then upheld the salary levels in the district in which they were applying, and the successful candidate actually took the job for greater remuneration than the outgoing superintendent?

It has been suggested that the WGCSA could benefit its members by publishing a salary survey. Even with 100 percent participation, that survey would be flawed at best and then twisted to someone's gain. I don't believe that we should have a say in dictating the salaries of superintendents across Wisconsin. Your best bet is still to call the local superintendents and find out what the remuneration level is in the first place. Call the majority of the superintendents in the immediate area.

When I have been asked by a green chairman what remuneration they should pay, I always give them a range from high to low. I then also provide the range, both high and low for assistant golf course superintendents. Then I ask them to describe the condition of the golf course they expect to have, based on the money they are willing to pay. Then I ask them if they are willing to fund a budget needed to attain the conditions they are seeking. Finally, I ask them what value they place on their number one asset, their golf course.

Under the subsection when visiting another golf course, call the superintendent first. Can you imagine my surprise as I looked up to see another superintendent playing my golf course? Does the phrase "common courtesy," spring into mind? Furthermore, no "thank you" was forwarded my way.

Earlier this summer, I debated with a coworker the unethical nature of a superintendent hiring a staff member on another superintendents trained crew, with no announcement.

I wasn't debating the freedom of hiring or the free movement of employees, but the protocol of just plain old fashioned good manners. I know that if superintendent "A" had called superintendent "B," he would have given superintendent "A" an excellent reference for the employee in question. For me, good ethics are to always treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. We should strive to maintain the highest order of integrity in our relationships with fellow golf course superintendents. This applies to assistants, sales representatives and educators associated with this profession.

Ethics, as a philosophy, always seem to bring to the table more questions than answers. Is it right to promote oneself as a CGCS without being a practicing golf course superintendent? Is it right to use the GCSAA logo on a score card when the superintendent of that facility is not a member of the National? Do you see what I mean? What are perfectly acceptable principles for some, can be totally unacceptable to others.

I know one absolute when it comes to ethical behavior: not everyone will agree on even the most basic elements of ethics. There is always an exception to a rule or an extenuating excuse. As for me, ethics are nothing more than basic common sense and good old fashioned manners. ♣

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