



The Too Efficient Superintendent

By Pat Norton
Nettle Creek CC

Isn't it interesting to note the similarities between operating a golf course...a drug store...fast food restaurant...or practically any other type of small business?

Because I'm very involved in our very busy public golf course...I get to see and observe all facets of our business. And though I'm not directly involved in either the golf shop or the restaurant, I see enough to know what's being done correctly or sometimes, incorrectly.

For example, our golf operation and golf shop really hum with people and the business that they bring with them. Golfers/golf patrons never wait for any length of time before they are helped with whatever they need. Customer service/satisfaction is one of the really important aspects of our business.

On the other hand, our new clubhouse with its idea of 'fine dining' and high prices is experiencing all sorts of management and operational problems...is causing lots of resentment amongst our members and golfers in general...and is destined for failure, I'm afraid! We have screwed up a good situation by building too much of a clubhouse! Does this sound all too familiar, Mr. Superintendent? Personally, it's the second time that I've been through this ordeal...once was enough, thank you very much!

And just why is it that golf course owners don't listen to their management experts enough? I suppose for the same reasons that hamburger chain corporate owners don't listen to their store managers...and think that, as owners...they have all of the answers.

This idea of *customer service* used to be sort of vague to me...and probably a lot less important. Aren't all similar types of businesses pretty much the same? Isn't one McDonald's just like another? In most ways, yes they are. In other significant ways each store is unique.

Our family knows, for example, that the McDonald's here in Morris

has great service, the employees really hustle and are friendly, and the place is always very clean and constantly being cleaned. Hence, we enjoy going there. Don't we all have certain expectations upon entering any McDonald's?

An extreme of sorts is the McDonald's near the Joliet Mall. We've gone there half a dozen times over the past four years...they do have a really cool PlayLand...but this place is always dirty and waiting for service is a certainty! Everybody knows that feeling, I think...the typical family comes in off the road...and runs into a roadblock in the form of slow moving lines and apathetic employees. But the fault only minimally lies with the actual employees...so I never complain directly to them. The problem with it all is poor management.

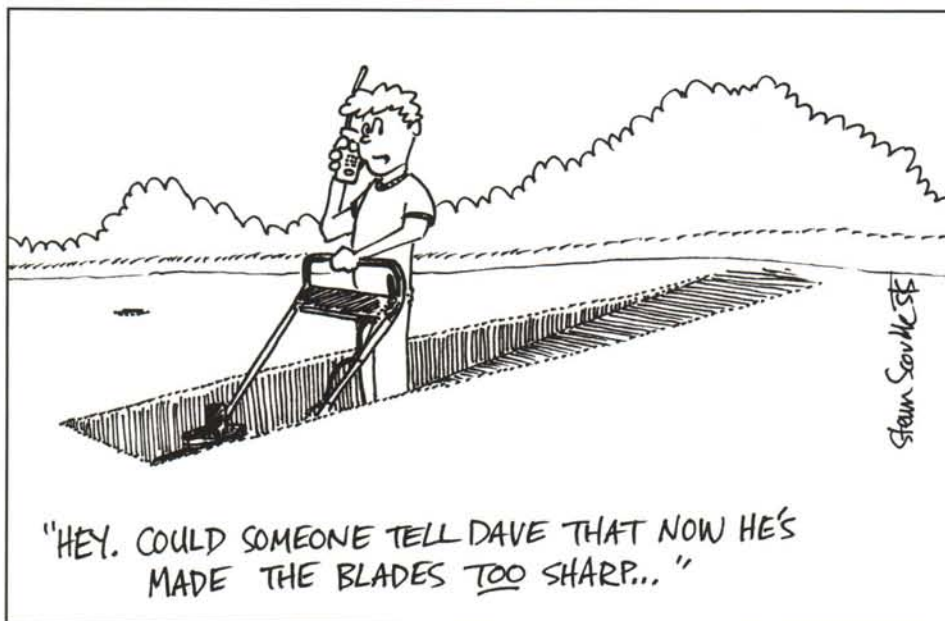
Poor management permeates these places, I think. Some small businesses have a very warped sense of proper management strategies. Let the customer wait because we're ultraconcerned about our labor costs? Understaff constantly so that the tables, floors, and windows are rarely cleaned and the customer has

to ask for a washcloth to clean off a place for his family to sit? They are basically managing to avoid losing money instead of managing to make money!

The smart corporation is not as concerned with zealously controlling expenses as they are with doing everything correctly so that the customer is always impressed and totally satisfied. This attitude is what brings people back to any establishment...repeat business, right?

Actually, management can get caught in the middle also in this negative situation. Managers work for profit driven corporations, don't they? So what comes first...the customer or controlling expenses to the extreme? Hey, folks, our little golf course is also a profit driven corporation...but we realize fully that unless we give our patrons more value than they expect for the price paid...they will not return!

As a negative example, on this very warm Sunday in August...wife Susan and children Megan and Tommy decided to first go catch some lunch at the local Burger
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King...and then do some shopping at the new SuperWalMart in town. We chose Burger King this day for whatever reason...but after our experience today I'm not sure that I ever want to return!

In contrast, the local McDonald's enjoys a great reputation...while our local BK has such problems that I'm amazed that we do return! After waiting in line today for 15-20 minutes, we began talking with our fellow unhappy customers.

Coincidentally, everybody had the same opinions of the situation and had anecdotes to tell about past BK experiences. I am usually a patient guy, but after awhile I got a little bit worked up! Wait, wait, wait...only to discover once again that there wasn't a totally clean table in the place, the floor as usual was littered with old french fries, napkins, and other assorted trash.

Burger King has an interesting setup also. Unlike at Wendy's, where they have a special self serve station for napkins, catsup, salt, pepper, straws, et al... that people tend to forget...BK controls its costs to the extreme in this department also. The forgetful customer has to stand in line again...or try somehow to get the frazzled workers' attention...as they desperately try to fill the incoming orders...in order to get the extra napkins, straws, or whatever...that people usually need.

Upon finally receiving our order we noticed the corporation plaque on the wall and the 'team mission statement' next to it...*"Burger King will be the number one hamburger chain establishment in America in terms of customer satisfaction and individual store profitability"*...it all had a certain amount of obvious irony to it all.

The loose link between all of this

and the title of this piece is the fact that we in the golf turfgrass world are also in the business of customer satisfaction. Our customer is the golfer or member, and our product is the golf course.

Our job is to create and maintain golf course playing conditions that are consistently good and clean...just like McDonald's is consistently good and clean. Golfers have certain expectations when they patronize ours or any other public golf course...nicely conditioned greens.. beautiful fairways and tees...a clean and tidy layout...and a friendly, helpful staff both inside and out on the course.

The problem is that sometimes we find ourselves trying to be too efficient...just like the BK corporation. Each and every day out on the course we plan and organize projects, daily chores, repairs...and always with an eye on the man-hour clock and the fact that as the weekend approaches...OT looms on the horizon!!!

To avoid the OT bugaboo, I usually a) kick my people off the property early on Friday, or depending on my mood, b) decide to bite the bullet...get the course looking great on Friday/Sat AM...and incur too many hours of overtime.

Of course, by Sun morning as I am figuring out timecards for the week...and forgetting how critical it was to work the overtime...and forgetting how nice the course does look for the weekend...and fretting over my weekly labor costs!

So, at times I am just like those management types that I despise...trying to do too much with way too little...and taking for granted the fact that golfers do notice when things on the course aren't quite up to snuff!

I had an interesting conversation once with a friend of mine in which

we realized the fact that our *total* course hourly labor budget was about equal to what his course was spending on just his two key men!

To me, that was a real eye opener...in the sense of what we were trying to accomplish at our golf course...which probably is just plain unrealistic. I've also compared that labor budget to the figures provided by fellow superintendents at other, better known public courses in south ChicagoLand.

Again, we spend quite a bit less on our employees...we have no full-time mechanic or assistant superintendent...and operate with many, many first year people that stay for one, two, or three years at most before moving into a real job at one of the industries in our county!

Then, the too efficient superintendent enters the fray...thinking all the while that he can handle the situation and still provide comparable conditions to those found elsewhere. His day consists almost entirely of crisis management...running around the property trying to stop that new employee that's spotted way *out there* operating some piece of machinery incorrectly...before said employee either runs over some female golfer or runs the darn mower into a tree.

Or else it's the constant *hands holding* of these new guys..."let me show you just what tools you'll need for this job, fellas...so just let me pick out the proper shovels and rakes for ya'll...and even though I can see that you don't really understand your assignment...get going anyhow...so it's almost like...***you'll need this much toilet paper to do the job correctly, my friend...!!!***"

The too efficient superintendent is also characterized as being always there...meaning out at the golf



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course. There is never any time off to enjoy even a monthly meeting...a field day...or a day off with the family...which leads to some serious burnout by late August.

The too efficient superintendent...in a tough year like '98...feels like he's constantly on the MultiPro 5200...spraying something...somewhere...with impatient golfers always just a hole behind...I am seriously checking into the Bioject as a means of getting some control over the disease pressures...way too hectic this year trying to keep ahead of dollar spot, brown patch, pythium, and take all patch.

The too efficient superintendent also tries to *get by* without a proper assistant...who would have the same zeal for the golf course. Instead, he relies on the long time college student employee...who basically knew how to do quite a few things...and who this summer discovered something beautiful called a *hot summer romance...which affected his work...at times...just a bit!!!*

Actually though, these summer romances amongst young people should never be discouraged... they make for great entertainment as the

young buck drags into work...late, bleary eyed, and totally hung over...again.

The only rule is that at some point the young lady gets properly introduced to the boss so an assessment can be made as to the worth of the inconvenience caused...which in Tims' case seems to have been well worth it...certainly for him, and even for us, I think...

It all brings back some very fond memories, eh what?

The too efficient superintendent also becomes just like that branch manager at BK...defensive over the lack of quality...or ready with reasons that sound too much like excuses for poor conditions. Actually, playing conditions are never poor or bad... because when prioritizing...the too efficient superintendent can usually provide very nice playing conditions... it everything goes as planned.

If any other variable, such as bad weather, trivial requests from superiors, irrigation problems, etc. pop up...there is no other choice but for these unforeseen problems to fall directly into the lap of the already overburdened, too efficient superin-

tendent. You see, he cannot admit that he needs help...when in truth...a helpful assistant could relieve much of the routine burden...enabling the superintendent to stay much fresher and ready to deal with unexpected problems.

It's sort of like the business owner insisting that he do everything himself...eventually he'll get so bogged down that he won't have any time or energy to deal with the potential growth of his company.

If you see yourself as a too efficient superintendent...always fading out at night before anyone else in the family...and really starting to hate arising in the mornings...do as I do. ***Be a party pooper and get more sleep!!!***

Then review your situation at the course...and honestly ask yourself about your future. Then get angry and vow to explore changing your life...and remember that all of that efficiency is usually taken for granted.

Let your superiors know just how "too efficiently" you operate their golf course...and find out from them if that's truly what they want from you.

You may be surprised at their reply. 🍷

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