



Leadership

By Dr. John Stier, Professor and Chair, Department of Horticulture, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Every now and then we hear heartening examples of good leadership that makes our world a better place. Ben Shumaker, a relatively recent University of Wisconsin graduate, developed the Memory Project after working overseas with a man who'd been shuffled around as a young orphan and had nothing in his life from his childhood, no pictures, mementos, nothing. The Memory Project now connects school children around the world with orphans. These children make mementos for orphans as part of their school curriculum, so when the orphans grow up they'll have some tangible connection to their childhood. Most of us tend to think

of leadership closer to home though, primarily associated with our profession, communities, or even families. When my favorite aunt's husband passed away several years ago, my cousin Anna mentioned to me what a blessing it was my father always stepped up to the plate and took care of whatever needed to be done. Although I'd seen my dad lead community efforts ranging from a youth drug alert program to using his engineering background to describe how bullets travel during a community discussion on a shooting range, it wasn't until then that I realized how others saw my dad. Anna's comments really made me realize how much leadership mattered, and

think about how much I was doing for myself instead of what I could be doing for other people. Leadership in all areas of life is important. The truly successful leaders may start in one area but almost always expand into other areas.

Why Leadership is Important

Leaders are looked to for solutions to both big and little problems. The leaders set the tone for not only how that particular problem is handled but also set the precedence for resolutions. The turf industry is facing some real tough challenges in the next few years. Constant public focus on the use of chemicals, water and even land for golf courses requires every



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superintendent to provide leadership at some level. Need examples? Consider the NR 151 rule that went into effect last year. Superintendents now have to develop a nutrient management plan, even though agriculture uses 95% of the state's fertilizer. Agriculture producers are largely exempt from the rule unless local cost-sharing is available because their leaders had a long-term relationship with regulators. This winter the Wisconsin legislature will consider a bill to ban most phosphorus applications for turf management. Legislative offices indicate stricter regulations on chemicals and fertilizers are forthcoming as golf course opponents have consistently hammered at their legislators. The National Resource Defense Council has petitioned the EPA to cancel all uses of 2,4-D. This petition has happened in spite of EPA's "white paper" on 2,4-D in August 2007 which reviewed over 300 studies and found no evidence of carcinogenicity. The cancellation of 2,4-D would truly set a negative outlook for virtually any synthetic chemical, as over 40 years of data have failed to show any significant adverse human health or environmental impacts from the herbicide. Where will the leadership come from to ensure a fair review?

Unlike the agricultural industry, which uses most of the 2,4-D, the turf industry has virtually no leadership in Washington D.C. It doesn't take a psychologist to visualize the probable outcome of the petition.

Superintendents usually do a good job leading at work, ensuring employees have a safe working environment, attending educational events to stay abreast of new developments and technologies, handling budgets responsibly, and communicating with zealous club members. Some of the more adventuresome superintendents volunteer to host the monthly meetings and serve on boards of the WGCSA or WTA. A few will step outside of their normal duties: part of the reason the technical standards for NR 151 are so reasonable and science-based was due to Doug Devries volunteering his time and energy to serve on a DNR committee to develop the guidelines.

Leadership qualities

Honesty, integrity, and hard work are easy identifiers of leaders and something that most people in our industry are innately capable of showing. Professionalism is a given requirement, ranging from how one acts around others to how one dresses. Blue

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jeans may be fine at some courses, but they shouldn't be torn or grease-stained; that's what coveralls are for. The off-color or rascist joke that was so funny at the family gathering may get laughs at work, but will actually erode a leader's standing. The need to avoid even perceived gender bias has assumed a central focus in our society, and this extends to workplaces even if no female employees are present. A reputation is like the proverbial needle-in-the-haystack: easily lost, almost impossible to regain.

Good leaders know how to delegate authority. Delegating the right type and amount of responsibilities to someone requires skill: it does no one any good for designee to be given a task they are not prepared to handle. A good leader will ensure their employees are constantly learning, so they can assume new responsibilities over time. Good leaders, though, aren't afraid to offer help at any level. For example, each semester all college departments are expected to send a faculty member to registration to help new students select their courses. When I emailed a request to our faculty this week for a representative, within minutes I got a response from our associate dean (he holds a 10% faculty appointment in our department) offering to represent Horticulture. Does the dean likely have better things to do? Yes, but I've seen him work late into the evenings too, and have received emails from him at 3 am and 6am of the same day. The point here is that he is not too proud nor does he feel too self-important to do whatever needs to be done.

I see a lot of people who lack basic writing and speaking skills because they didn't think them necessary while they were in high school or college. Historically, bluster and a good sword arm might have been enough to lead a nation, but in our times good written and oral communication skills are critical for leaders. Consensus-building is a must, and for that one needs to be able to convince people of the good points of various ideas and accept compromise. A positive attitude is also appreciated. As a new faculty member several years ago, I saw our office administrator smile while being harangued by a staff person who felt the system was working against them; afterwards, the staff person was in a better state to receive the help she needed. I was inspired; to me our office administrator exhibited good leadership. If you don't like what's being said or shown to you, remember the 3 C's: communicate, cooperate, but don't confront. Discuss views as if they were not necessarily your own but from a vague, omniscient source; get the antagonist to start thinking your views are actually theirs. Recognition is the key to life: recognize opportunities, recognize others' capabilities, recognize when you need to act and when you can let events unfold. Normally, if a problem is starting to occur, it needs to be dealt with immediately.

Leadership Examples

Our Wisconsin golf course industry is fortunate to have had a number of leaders. Monroe Miller, Tom Harrison and the others who started the WTA and developed the O.J. Noer facility are easy examples. Dave Brandenburg's volunteering to edit *The Grass Roots* after Monroe's retirement is another good example. Look how many articles Dave writes in the magazine. The quality hasn't changed a bit, but with over 1000 superintendents and assistant superintendents in Wisconsin, I'll bet there's a few more people who could write articles.

Sometimes leadership comes from the people we don't necessarily expect. My new research technician, Ben Pease, is proving himself to be such a person. I hired him to oversee the maintenance of Horticulture's research plots and herbicide trials. He has quickly shown his leadership by working with others at the Noer to make sure their plots are properly maintained, taken the lead on purchasing a mower when the donor company was no longer going to provide it free of charge, and helping out with general maintenance of the facility. He exemplifies the characteristics of what

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is known as the 360 degree leader—a person who is not necessarily in a leadership position *per se*, but takes care of what is needed without being asked and offers up helpful suggestions with no thought of reward or special recognition for themselves.

How to Become a Leader

Good leaders pay attention and exhibit humility. Complaining is not an option. Problems and difficulties are seen as opportunities to grow and change for the better. Solving problems is like taking a multiple choice exam: several solutions may exist, but good leaders will listen to others then develop or select the best option. Consequently, good leaders surround themselves with good people. It starts with making good choices for friends—are you friends with someone because they are fun to go to the bars with or because you respect how they conduct their life? I've relied on an advisory committee of other faculty since I became department chair. We meet about once monthly to discuss issues and identify solutions. I know they've helped me avoid some mistakes and are helping me be a better chairperson.

True leaders try their best every day. When something needs doing (e.g., picking up a rake that was left away from the bunker), they do it rather than thinking “that’s

not my job”. People with leadership potential are on time and seek out work, including that which no one else wants to do (e.g., clean the shop, adjust heads that need it when you’re going back to the shop for lunch). Leaders encourage others — a good indication of a leader is when that person’s peers begin to seek their opinion, especially about how the seeker should go about doing something. Good leaders seek out facts before acting on something, especially if the situation is based on what someone said happened. Events and overheard discussions are easily misperceived. As a potential leader, make sure you look people in the eye when speaking with them, and don’t take yourself too seriously.

Volunteering for extracurricular activities will help build leadership skills. Our WGCSA board is all volunteers, and we’ve had some excellent leaders develop their skills by working on the board. There should be competition for each board position every year—how would you like it if only one candidate announced themselves for office of the President of the U.S.? No one needs to feel slighted if they are not elected; if a person is truly interested in serving on the board they can try again. If you don’t feel you can commit to a full board position, see if there’s another way to help, for example,

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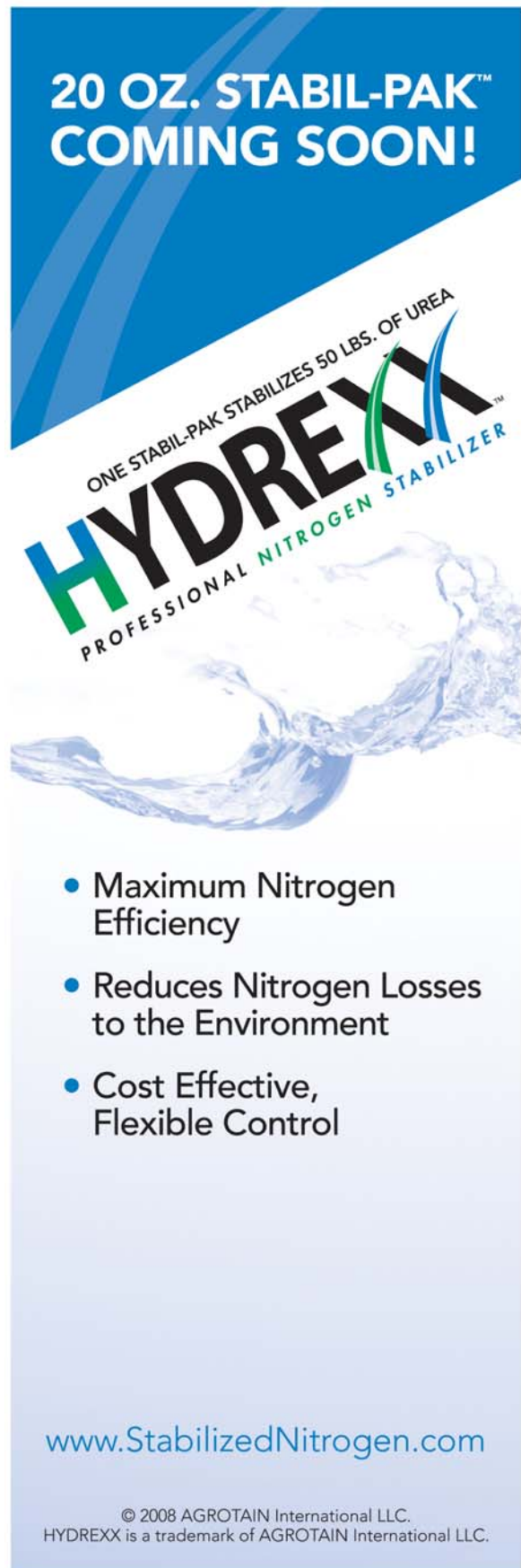
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could you show up an hour early and conduct the registration for the spring business meeting in March, freeing up one of the board member's time? Leadership skills and recognition can be gained by being active in the community. Some of the WGCSA members have served on school boards and volunteer fire departments. Joining the local Kiwanis or Rotary club is a great way to gain leadership skills while enhancing your reputation in the community. When an issue arises that needs your professional attention, such as a proposed ban on synthetic chemical use for turf management in the village, your standing with the local community group will ensure your input carries more weight than if no one had previously heard your name.

Not everyone will have the self-confidence and communication skills to feel comfortable at trying to lead, but these skills can be gained at any age or career stage. Community colleges can be a great help for improving basic writing and accounting skills. A Dale Carnegie® Training course, available since 1912, helps people develop self-improvement skills (www.dalecarnegie.com). Toastmasters® is an international organization that has helped people to develop their public speaking and leadership skills since 1924. The skills they teach are designed to help people in many situations, including those in positions that the employer is likely to or has already cut. There are over 90 meeting locations in Wisconsin alone (www.toastmasters.org).

What You'll Get Out of Leadership

A small set of people become leaders because they think it will lead to financial success or because they like power. These types of leaders rarely become good leaders, unless their mindset changes towards developing a social good. Many people become leaders out of necessity, a problem develops which threatens their well-being. Some people become leaders because they feel an obligation. George Washington likely became the leader he was for all these reasons. As a young man he wanted to rise above his older brother's legacy; the desire for power and recognition led to his involvement in the French and Indian War. His bravery during the annihilation of Braddock's army in the forests of Pennsylvania enhanced his standing with the colonies. His subsequently high reputation allowed him to present himself as a viable commander of the Revolutionary forces in 1775. His involvement in the Revolution was likely precipitated by Great Britain's tax system and other regulations which was hurting the income of he and other aristocratic planters. Along the way, though, he appears to have continually developed a sense of leading for the common good. I think that ultimately, all good leaders realize that they have become good leaders because it gives a sense of satisfaction. Do you have what it takes to be a leader? 



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