

DEALING WITH LABOR SHORTAGES

By Norma O'Leary, CGCS
Silver Bay Country Club

The purpose of this article is to stimulate alternative ideas on dealing with the difficulty of finding staff from a reduced labor pool. I have dealt with this issue for quite some time, although my difficulty stems more as a result of budget constraints than as a result of a limited labor pool.

I was hired as the Golf Course Superintendent/Club Manager at the Silver Bay Country in the spring of 1990. Very early that spring, an ice storm caused extensive damage to many of the treetops on the golf course. Many trees broke off or had to be cut down due to the storm. In addition, one of the smaller bridges on the golf course was lifted from its position and forced several hundred feet downstream from its original location. Roger Spencer, who preceded me as Silver Bay's Greens Superintendent, contacted about 20 men from the men's club, arranged for each of them to show up at the golf course at the same time, and then organized them to pick the bridge up in unison and return it to its original position. As I stood there and watched them accomplish this, I was thinking how nice it would be if each of them carried off some of the broken limbs and downed trees. I guess I was half serious and half kidding when I suggested this to the group, but the next day was Men's League, and since the golf course was still too wet to play, these 20 men and a number of others, showed up with chain saws, wheel barrows, and rakes; and in a little more time than it takes to play their normal 9 Hole round of golf for league, they had the entire golf course clean as a whistle. Afterwards, we provided them with steaks that they cooked for themselves on the barbeque grills. This turned out to be far more productive than I could ever have imagined. In one evening, I got to be very well acquainted with a large portion of the membership and they in turn each got to meet me; but more importantly, it opened my eyes to a very valuable resource.

I must admit, that this type of thing was tried rather unsuccessfully at the golf course where I began my career. At that particular golf course, we tried on one occasion to organize a volunteer tree-planting day. Only one volunteer

showed up, and needless to say, it was a total flop. I later deduced that the members at that particular golf course would prefer to have their dues increased to assure the completion of certain projects, rather than volunteer their labor to accomplish these same tasks. I now contend that while there certainly are a substantial percentage of your members that would agree with that, there are also a number of them who would love the opportunity to become part of a project that will improve the playing conditions or aesthetic appearance of their golf course. The reason we were unsuccessful with our volunteer tree-planting day, was that we failed to recognize this difference in preferences among members, and therefore did not target the proper group.

Fortunately for me, a larger portion of the Membership at Silver Bay are the type that are ideal for accomplishing these type of tasks, so I was able to identify this group rather quickly. Each year since 1990 we have taken on at least one large project that has been accomplished primarily with volunteer labor.

Our largest project has been the installation of an automated irrigation system. Even though budget constraints forced us to spread this project over three years, once installed, the system was completely paid for. The original irrigation system consisted of a manual quick coupler system with one quick coupler at each tee, and two by each green; and was fueled by a large diesel pump that pumped water from the Beaver River, which runs through the golf course. In 1991, we purchased all of the pipe, sprinklers, wire, and other components necessary for a single row system down the center of each fairway. We had about 13 - 16 volunteers that were able to help on a regular basis. We removed the sod prior to digging each trench, installed all of the necessary parts and wire, back filled the trench with the blade of the trencher, manually tamped it as best as possible, scooped up all of the excess spoil (by hand), and replaced the sod. We did one fairway per day. The first one took more than 13 hours; but as we progressed throughout

the golf course, the volunteers became more proficient and by time we got to the last fairway, we had the sod lifted and replaced within 7 hours. Before we began, I was somewhat worried that doing it this way would result in many leaks, poor joints, or unlevelled heads. While it is a never-ending battle for us to keep the heads level in our unstable, clay soil; I can assure you that the heads

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were all level to begin with and there was only one leak that was the result of a poorly glued joint. Running an aerator along the trench and then raking the plugs into the trench dealt with sunken trenches after the fact, while not a huge problem since we left a little mound. The next season we constructed a holding reservoir and pumping station. The reservoir was dug in the middle of the golf course, and all of the spoil was placed and shaped around the perimeter of the pond. The volunteers were not involved in digging the reservoir but once completed, the disturbed area was very much in play so sodding was the only acceptable solution. The volunteers took on this task brilliantly, spending four 8-hour days, sodding this area. Most of the sod was cut and harvested on site, which as you know, is much more labor intensive than laying sod that someone cuts for you. It does not take long to identify the strengths and talents of each of your volunteers, so you know which ones to contact for certain tasks. Those that are the best carpenters were given the task of building the pump house, and I was then able to assemble the pumping station.

The final year involved running the pipe to and around the greens and tees, putting in all of the satellite control boxes, and running the wire to these boxes. The pipe and

sprinkler installation was handled much the same as that in the fairway, by removing and replacing the sod. We rented a wirepuller for one day and were able to extend the wiring from wherever the large bunches were dropped off in the fairway to the control boxes. The system has worked out extremely well for our golf course and watching it operate for the first time was an event that was enjoyed and highly anticipated by every individual that participated in the project.

Another major project accomplished with volunteer labor was the installation of a herringbone drainage system under two of our push-up greens. Sod was removed and laid off to the side in the pattern in which it was removed. Trenches were lined with plywood and spoil was hand shoveled into trucksters. Tile was installed and covered with drain rock and trenches were then backfilled with sand. Sod was very carefully replaced in the exact location from which it was removed. Both of these greens drainage projects were very successful. Each green was out of play for approximately 1.5 days, and within one week, scars were quite difficult to detect. We did experience problems with one of the two greens draining too quickly, making it difficult to keep an adequate moisture level at certain times of year, but that problem has been remedied with the installation of a control valve at the drains outlet than can be

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opened or closed, depending on the needs of the green. These projects would have been impossible with our limited maintenance crew and budget, but very practical and affordable with the help of the volunteers.

OTHER PROJECTS COMPLETED WITH VOLUNTEER LABOR SINCE 1990

- + Cleaning up of golf course after several storm occurrences.
- + Spring Cleaning of Clubhouse each season.
- + Operate Food and Registration tents during Tournaments.
- + Re-shingling of the Clubhouse

Roof.

+ Construction of Railroad Retaining Wall and ornamental bed along #7 Tee box.

+ Construction of an enclosed and heated shop area within new maintenance shed.

+ Repainting of Clubhouse interior
+ Rock removal and Finish grading of several construction projects.

+ Installation of a 1500 foot Natural Gas Line from Farm Tap to Clubhouse

+ Construction of suitable Pesticide Storage Facility.

+ Installation of several hundred feet of drainage lines.

+ Installation of Granite Tee Signs and attractive framing of these signs

+ Remodeling of Women's Restroom in clubhouse.

+ Remodeling of Pro Shop area and Pro Shop display racks.

+ Removal of Clubhouse carpeting, in preparation for installation of new carpet.

+ Construction of golf cart enclosure area..

+ Completion of three replacement bridges spanning the Beaver River.

At one of our annual membership meetings the wife of one of the individuals that frequently participates in these projects approached me and asked how I get these guys to continue to participate in what are often quite labor intensive and exhausting projects. I did not have a good answer for her question. I do not know why these individuals continue to volunteer for what is often quite strenuous work; all

I know is that they do.

Based on what I have found in the last 10 years of planning these volunteer projects, I have come up with a few tips that I believe have led to the successful implementation of the projects we have undertaken at Silver Bay. These tips are as follows:

+ The project must be very well planned and thought out

Be prepared to assign tasks immediately and perhaps more importantly; do not have too much help on hand. Helpers will quickly lose interest if it appears that they are not needed.

+ Recognize early the talents of each individual

Delegate to each individual the task they are best suited for. This is best accomplished by knowing in advance their work history, hobbies and interests.

+ Identify early those that work best together

It should come as no surprise that some people work very well together, and others disagree on too many

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things to get much accomplished. Your volunteers must enjoy whom they are working with or they may never come back.

+ Provide plenty of free food and beverage

Provide them with a good meal during normal meal times, and make sure they have plenty to drink. They may not be willing to return if you do not keep them comfortable while they are there.

+ Make sure they have the tools they need to do the job

Go to the local rental outlet, if necessary, to equip the volunteers with modern power tools. They will not be interested in helping you if they know there is a better way to do the job.

+ Take great interest in all of their ideas and suggestions

They need to be treated as a valuable resource that you appreciate. There is usually more than one way to accomplish a task. Do not let your ego prevent you from listening to the alternatives.

+ Insure General Liability coverage where Workman's Compensation will not apply

Another very valuable resource for accomplishing major

projects may already be at your disposal. I would also like to take this opportunity to stress the importance of recognizing the talents that you have on your existing staff. If you are using retired personnel to accomplish some of your mowing, you have many years of life experience on your staff. We are very fortunate to have a very talented welder and steel worker on our mowing staff, who has been responsible for the replacement of three of our golf cart bridges that each span 80 feet across the Beaver River. Most of the steel beams that were welded together to construct the bridge superstructure were donated from the North Shore Mining Co. While most courses will not be that fortunate, you never know until you start researching your options. Excluding labor (much of it was volunteer), we have approximately \$2,000 invested in each of the three bridges we replaced. Compare this to the cost bids we received that were in excess of \$50,000 each! Never underestimate the value of the resources you already have.

The ideas presented in this writing may not generate much interest from those that have larger budgets to work with, or those courses that do not have a membership from which to generate these resources. I personally believe, however, that as golf course maintenance costs continue to

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Life Balance And Bottom-Line Impact

Why should your golf facility care about life balance? The answer is simple: you need to retain your skilled workers.

Importance: In today's work environment, workers are hard to find and harder to retain. By 2006, that will become even more significant. Every year U.S. companies are paying more than \$140 billion in recruiting, training and administrative costs to replace employees who leave.

Employers are learning more ways to help them seek and retain the best workers. Benefits have increased, perks have gotten more interesting and life balance is being recognized as a major contributor to an employee's happiness.

Signs of Life-Work Imbalance

- + Employees are leaving for other jobs.
- + Productivity is declining.
- + Little initiative is shown and new projects aren't proposed.
- + There is little or no interest in professional development.
- + Employees have low energy.
- + People are constantly complaining.

Remember, It Is Within Employers And Manager's Power To:

- + Increase productivity.
- + Provide interesting and challenging work.
- + Provide training and development opportunities for workers.
- + Heighten awareness and commitment.
- + Lower stress levels.

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provide the playing conditions that are demanded, without the unlimited budget that many have come accustomed to.

We are very proud of the things that have been accomplished through our membership at the Silver Bay Country Club. The members that have participated in these projects have become "good friends" of the maintenance. These members never complain when we aerate or topdress greens, nor do they complain when the NO CARTS

sign is up after a heavy rain. They take great pride in their golf course because they have played such a large role in improving the conditions of it.

A good Golf Course Superintendent will recognize that he or she is working for the golfers, and these are the people who will dictate whether or not they are doing a satisfactory job. Imagine the unique relationship that is established when you change the structure somewhat, so that your bosses are now working for you.

